

SUBMISSION TO THE NSW BUSH FIRE INQUIRY

The NSW Bush Fire Emergency 2019 – 2020

The Continuing Development of Emergency Management Capabilities in NSW

Background.

The author has been involved in the emergency management arrangements in NSW through various appointments since 1996. This continues today in his current appointment as CEO of the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils (**WSROC**) representing the collective interests of local government in Western Sydney. Previously as a senior executive in the RTA he was responsible for developing policy and protocols for responding to emergencies and incidents on NSW roads and in 2007 was appointed as an Australian Defence Force Liaison officer to support the NSW – Commonwealth emergency management arrangements, a role that continues today.

This submission has been developed with a particular focus on the NSW Bushfire Emergency from commentary supplied by WSROC member Councils and the author's own experiences serving as an Australian Defence Force Liaison Officer in the RFS SOC as well as being the Defence representative on the South West Metro Regional Emergency Management Committee for over a decade.

Some of the less desirable outcomes of the NSW response to the bushfires have their roots in policy and practices spanning a couple of decades and the author also draws on his own experiences to demonstrate contributing factors while suggesting more effective arrangements.

The views expressed in this submission should not be construed as being official Defence positions in any way.

The State's emergency management arrangements are based on an all hazards approach, many of the areas suggested for improvement are structural in nature and will therefore affect preparedness, response and recovery capabilities across all hazards.

It should be acknowledged that the performance of the RFS as the combat agency in this instance has attracted little substantiated criticism and generally should be regarded, with few exceptions, as having met expectations, whether statutory or community-based.

This submission looks at the emergency management arrangements not only in support of the combat agency but also in the preparation of the State at various levels and across a number of functions to respond to the bushfire emergency.

There were many instances of processes working well and excellent outcomes from the combined efforts of the State, local government and communities, these should be acknowledged in so far that they provide a counter-perspective to the more negative but necessary perspective that is the very nature of the narrative in this submission.

Executive Summary.

In summary, the observations include the following;

- Lack of leadership from the Office of Emergency Management to generally better prepare NSW for emergency and catastrophic events through effective programs that;
 - promoted community resilience in the true sense of the concept, and
 - ensured that the most effective capabilities were developed in preparation for, and in response to emergencies, by maintaining focus and momentum.
- There was a distinct lack of situational awareness at the Office Emergency Management to the bushfire threat and the community challenges already in play leading up to the bushfires and a very slow response to the changing circumstances especially in providing support to local government.
- The former combining of Police, the Emergency Services and Emergency Management, reporting to a single Ministry (MPES), diminished critical assessment of capabilities and deficiencies in the area of emergency management and exacerbated confusion between the functions of emergency management and emergency services.
- The current combining of Police, the Emergency Services and Emergency Management (OEM) under a single Minister, similar to the previous arrangements appears to be too great a span of control for a Minister to be sufficiently across the brief and, as before, diminished a critical assessment of capabilities and failed to properly identify deficiencies.
- There was a growing “effective relationship” gap between MPES/OEM and the professional officers (REMOs) tasked with planning and executing emergency management. This gap manifested itself as high staff turnover, poor morale, a growing level of frustration and increased risk to our community.
- The documented emergency management arrangements, i.e. the process of escalation are inconsistent with how emergency management actually occurs in the greater Sydney metropolitan area.
- Emergency management is increasingly becoming involved in day-to-day emergency services operations. The result is confusion on roles and responsibilities, wasted resources, and a substantial distraction from the real task of emergency preparedness, response and recovery.
- Limited “community resilience” funding is being wasted on well-meaning programs that produce little ongoing “resilience enhancing” strategic capabilities within communities.
- There are instances of wasteful spending on SES facilities/depots because of an apparent lack of a strategic plan that drives future development from a whole of Government perspective.
- The number and specific capabilities of emergency operations centres are not considered to represent the optimum arrangements.
- It was clearly evident at Region Emergency Management Committee meetings there is significant frustration at the lack of leadership and direction from the emergency management function within MPES/OEM. An example that is indicative of the problem; local government was tasked with an activity involving a risk assessment and associated mitigation of major threats without an adequate guiding framework or strategic advice from

the public sector agencies that have statutory responsibility for the “risk environments”. In short, local government is adding little value, feel disengaged and those that are trying to do something are wasting valuable resources.

- Local Government participation at regional emergency management committee meetings varies greatly because of the perceived lack of value of attending these meetings relative to other priorities.
- The State Government made numerous announcements about community support packages and initiatives, and while very much welcome came as a surprise, and at times with little detail that proved problematic with community engagement outcomes.
- The role of local government, especially in the recovery phase needs a rigorous investigation and development of appropriate plans/protocols aligned to likely threats.

Comment.

In 2014 the author attended a community-based seminar titled "Community Resilience" attended by the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, and many chief executives of public sector agencies. It was obvious that everyone was talking about emergency response capabilities and not community resilience as is the understanding in more progressive jurisdictions.

Such fundamental misunderstandings present a real and substantial threat to our community. It raises critical questions about who is accountable for steering policy and capability development in preparation for those times of the utmost challenge to our community.

The author’s participation at several Sydney South West Metropolitan Region and the Sydney Metropolitan Region Emergency Management Committee meetings continues to suggest that;

- high value emergency management resources continue to be systematically wasted,
- community resilience is in decline due to the widespread deployment of more sophisticated but less resilient technology and broader Government policy that produces poor resilience outcomes,
- preparation for responding to and recovery from emergencies as defined in the SERM Act has shown little improvement over the past two decades as the emergency management arrangements continue to be distracted in day to day operational activities of the emergency services.

It is acknowledged that the Region Emergency Management Committee (REMC) meetings provides an opportunity for inter-agency relationship building and developing personal contacts but it is obvious that over 90% of what is discussed has little to do with Emergency Management per say and produces low-value outcomes for such high-value resources.

The intention is not to be critical of the officers that are members of the REMC, in fact their dedication and professionalism is to be admired, they have much knowledge and are committed to serving their community. Rather the criticism is directed at the lack of leadership and absence of guidance to make the most of this unique capability (REMC) within the public service.

The State's emergency management capabilities are failing in the basics but it finds time to be distracted by inconsequential issues that have little to do with emergency management as defined in the SERM Act.

Recommendations.

(1) A more practical approach to managing emergencies in urban and peri-urban areas. (i.e. lets actually acknowledge what really happens in these areas).

- Response to emergencies in or on the boundaries of the Greater Sydney Metropolitan Area (GSMA) , including those that may require the activation of emergency management arrangements do not follow the process indicated in the State DISPLAN and associated sub-plans and protocols. The "escalation" process described from the LEOC, through a REOC and then the SEOC happens only in the "textbooks".
- In the GSMA even a relatively minor emergency is dealt with by combat agency, state-level 24/7 Operations Centres. There are quite a few of these including; Transport Management Centre, RFS State Operations Centre, SES Ops Centre, Rail Management Centre, NSW Ambulance Service HQ, Fire and Rescue NSW, Police Operations Centre etc.
- Unless the emergency is catastrophic in nature with no advance warning then these state-level operations centres are already responding to an emergency before the SEOC is formally activated.
- Therefore the notion of LEOC and REOC in the GSMA urban area forming some part of the emergency escalation chain is demonstrably redundant.

(2) The number, locations and capabilities of local and regional emergency operations centres within the GSMA need a fundamental re-assessment consistent with meeting strategic objectives and supporting combat agencies in responding to obvious place-based threats.

- Not all Local Government Areas require Local Emergency Operations Centres (LEOC) based on risk or past experiences. Existing arrangements provide for substandard or ad hoc facilities that are deficient in space and function. There is simply no need for 35 LEOCs in the GSMA.
- Regional Emergency Operations Centres are based on the boundaries of Police "administrative" areas rather than operational considerations in response to place-based hazards.
- It is acknowledged that because of the scale, location or intensity of an emergency, suitably equipped "Urban Emergency Operations Centres" in the GSMA would be required to accommodate a substantial component of the multi-agency command, control and co-ordination capabilities to complement the SEOC and support the combat agency on direction by the SEOC. These could be at a "regional" scale, suitably equipped, providing mutual support to one another, spatial based back-up and located for best effects. This would negate the need for LEOCs and REOCs and replace them with a small network of highly effective operations centres.
- "Tactical level" forward emergency operations centre can be established on direction from the SEOC or a REOC (or equivalent).

- The need to maintain LEMC and REMC in urban areas is removed with available resources being directed to the establishment of a number of Urban Emergency Management Committees.
- LEOCON's receive little formal EM training and exposure under the current arrangements, and on very few occasions when deployed on exercises or operations have demonstrated a lack of appreciation of process or other agency capabilities, therefore removing this role reduces risk.
- The current arrangements are considered suitable for rural/regional areas of NSW.

(3) Return the Regional Emergency Management Committees to dealing with emergency management planning and preparedness and not emergency service operations.

- Over the past 2 decades the author has attended numerous South West Metropolitan District and Sydney Metropolitan District Emergency Management Committee meetings and it is obvious that this most valuable resource is being wasted.
- Without exception all of the REMC meetings that the author has attended have had one thing in common, 90% of the time and effort has nothing to do with emergency management but rather the emergency services and their responses to routine emergency events.
- For example, in preparation for the bushfire season, instead of;
 - discussing how vulnerable communities are identified and managed, or how whole communities are evacuated efficiently,
 - or how power supplies to critical infrastructure (i.e. petrol stations) are maintained,
 - or how communications with communities are maintained after their mobile devices run out of power during a period of power disruption,

the majority of the time is spent in discussing routine emergencies (i.e. Hazmat incidents on a motorway, a roof collapse on an apartment complex etc) that Government agencies have statutory responsibilities and sufficient capabilities to respond appropriately.

- In particular REMC should not be distracted by trying to deal with the planning associated with major events, or the development of emergency management arrangements for new infrastructure coming on-line, nor should it be reporting on hazmat or other incidents on our road network, nor should it be second guessing what other Government agencies are doing to meet their statutory obligations but this is exactly what is happening. A review of the Minutes will demonstrate what the author is talking about.
- The question then becomes, why not use REMC to solve problems, give them well-defined tasks where regional expertise can be applied to develop policy and protocols and guide em capability development.

(4) Specifically address in the State DISPLAN and other supporting documents the capabilities of single/multi-agency 24/7 state level operations centres and the relationship/protocols with SEOC and combat agencies.

- The relationship and interoperability between the SEOC, REOCs and these state-level operations centres needs further investigation.
- How do these “operations centres” provide mutual support, what are the contingency arrangements for one to take over the functions of another that has been impacted by the emergency,
- Are these developed with primary and secondary roles,

(5) Thoroughly investigate the future role of local government in the preparation, response and recovery phases of an emergency response.

- Not all local government areas have the same exposure to threats, in terms of scope, scale or intensity, this needs to be reflected in the em plans,
- Local government is now far more active than they have been in the past in contributing to em response and recovery, this varies greatly between LGAs, is there a set of optimum capabilities that Councils should develop and be supported by the Commonwealth and State Governments.

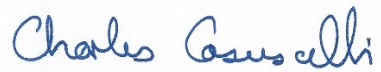
(6) Review the allocation of grants for building community resilience.

- The allocation of limited funding to projects that seek to enhance community resilience can only be described as fragmented and directed to very localised initiatives that produce very short-term outcomes. There appears to be very little sophistication in how moneys are allocated and how outcomes are assessed of being of “value”.
- A review of past projects suggests that very little has been achieved in increasing resilience capability at a strategic level, whether individually or collectively.
- To demonstrate the failure of the current methodology and priorities consider the following; two critical aspects of urban resilience is access to potable water and energy during emergencies. In NSW, communities have been installing rain water tanks and solar power systems for some time, the sheer numbers now reflect strategic resources. And yet during emergencies (where access to water and energy has been disrupted) no-one has looked into how the water in those rainwater tanks can easily be made into potable water and no-one has looked at how solar power systems can easily be modified to provide household access to the power that is generated instead of it being dissipated into the non-effective grid.

Conclusion.

It is unfortunate that any lack of strategic capability within a State’s Emergency Management arrangements is only identified during an emergency event that is intense and protracted in scale. The Royal Commission into the Victorian Bushfires (2009) and The Commission of Inquiry Into the Queensland Floods (2010-2011) both identified major deficiencies in those states respective emergency management arrangements even though, just like in NSW, everything was considered by former Governments and the Government of the day to “be on track”.

History proved them wrong and we need to take the opportunity to be better prepared. At the very least an understanding of our deficiencies can lead to mitigation, unaddressed they represent a real and immediate risk.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Charles Casuscelli". The signature is written in a cursive style with a light blue background behind the text.

Charles Casuscelli RFD

CEO

Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils.