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NSW Bushfire Inquiry

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Wingecarribee Shire Council Submission to NSW Bushfire Inquiry

We would like to provide the following feedback to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry. We give our permission for this submission to be made public.

What worked well

Given the lack of resources with bush fires burning in many different areas of the state, the response by the local incident management team and the activation and response of local brigades from an EOC perspective, appears to have worked well with mostly good coordination. The support by other agencies namely FRNSW and SES was impressive in both the lead up to the fires arriving in the shire and their support in the field. The local SES were well coordinated and were used to advantage door knocking, delivering meals and assisting with tree removal/make safe jobs.

The EOC operations were well coordinated with all agency representatives and those liaison officers present, performing their duties professionally and in a timely manner. The cooperation and willingness by all agencies to become involved and assist in other ways that are not their core business was exceptional. Everyone worked extremely well together.

What didn't work well

What didn't work well was having Incident Control separated from the EOC in another Shire without a dedicated RFS liaison officer stationed within our EOC. It definitely reflected in the EOCs ability, despite having a Police Liaison officer in the Incident Management location, to convey pertinent information in a timely manner. The Police Liaison Officer was requested to perform other duties assisting the IMT and was therefore unable to pass on timely information.

The lack of situational awareness and changes greatly hampered the EOC efforts in providing needed assistance and information. The one day we had an RFS liaison officer on the premises (not in the EOC) their contribution was sparse as they were caught up in other duties.

Emergency Warnings were sporadic and in some cases the messaging served to instill panic when received i.e. too late to leave, shelter in place. To the average person such a message instills the flight or fight response. Messaging needs to be tailored to the recipient's level of understanding of emergency management language and arrangements and designed not to instill panic.

Neighbourhood Safer Places were problematic as people believed (by virtue of the name), it was a safe place to shelter. Greater awareness of the 'neighbourhood safer place' intention needs to be better understood by the greater community and its limitations. It is a place of last resort and should have signage indicating its

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intention, rules and limitations. Having 200 cars tightly packed in the dark in the middle of an oval has already compromised the intention of the 'safer place'.

While we definitely agree that during an emergency event it is essential to have a 'Single Point of Truth' for communicating fire progression and other emergency actions the combat agency requires of the community, but some written parameters around what that includes would be helpful. From an EOC's perspective, it would be beneficial to know what standing arrangements for evacuation centres can be freely conveyed to the community by Council without prior publication by the combat agency. In the case of large animal relocation for example, it is very difficult to load and move horses at the best of times and almost impossible if they are panicked. Animal owners as we have seen, are passionate about the wellbeing of their pets, often to their own detriment. When there is a lack of information the community starts to panic. It reflects badly on Local Government if it cannot reassure the community in a timely manner that we have arrangements in place that will allow them to remove themselves and their animals from harms way. A clearer definition therefore of what constitutes 'combat agency only' advice would help alleviate concern and control panic.

During the fires our community relied on social media communications to try and piece together what was happening. Unfortunately, updates were slow and sporadic and created frustration and stress for those in affected areas. Communications at all levels by incident control need to be urgently upgraded as this was the single largest item that caused problems for the operation of the EOC and control of community panic and preparations. While the community meetings process worked well, it is evident that greater resources need to be allocated to the communications and media function.

Changes to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disasters

The single most important change that needs to happen is the involvement of Local Government in all aspects of the Prevent, Preparedness, Mitigation, Response and Recovery (PPMRR) cycle with the community. Community engagement by Local Government in education and preparation is essential for the wellbeing of the whole community starting with communications. From a community perspective, knowing that your LGA are concerned with the well being of the community will not only build trust and cooperation, but greatly assist in mitigating the effects of an emergency event, make organising and executing response easier and further streamline future recovery coordination. The 2020 Bush Fire recovery process has shown us how important and instrumental local government can be in the process however funding that level of engagement is essential as many LGAs simple don't have the financial resources to be able to execute at the level required.

From an interagency perspective, an annual review of MOUs by agencies will assist in preparations and planning for a coordinated response.

The functional areas and supporting agencies have a limited number of officers with the knowledge and/or experience of EOC operations and multi-agency response in general. There needs to be significant mandatory training and preparation for EOC officers (multiple from each agency in each EOC location) that will enable greater efficiencies and better record keeping during an event and the smooth continuous operations of the EOC.

Funding for EOCs at a local level to upgrade equipment and technology is needed and financial assistance (possibly a yearly budget) to enable education projects and community preparation efforts would go a long way to facilitating local innovation and initiatives.

Other points to note

Communications during emergency events from utility companies particularly those that provide power to a local government area are critically important. It is recognised that during emergencies it can be necessary for power to be disconnected. However, where an LGA is a water and sewer service provider any intention to disconnect power should be communicated prior to the disconnection.

Thank you for accepting this late submission and if you require any further information please contact my office on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely



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General Manager