

## Emergency and Disaster Management – The Australian experience

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### Introduction

Australia is a land of extremes. Consequently, we experience extreme weather events on a fairly regular basis. In the north cyclones and floods are not uncommon and wildfire is a continual threat in the more temperate zones. Fortunately, Australia has not had to deal with many of the catastrophes that occur throughout the rest of the world. We are relatively free of significant diseases, both human and animal such as foot and mouth, rinderpest, malaria and smallpox, and of the man-made events such as terrorism and war. It is not surprising that we have developed a well understood and practiced protocol for managing natural disasters, but are not as well versed in managing disease or human instigated emergencies. The protocol is universal – which is its greatest strength. It has been applied to the Ash Wednesday fires, the Brisbane floods, the Granville train disaster and to the Port Arthur massacre. The purpose of this paper is to provide a snapshot of those arrangements and to highlight the role of Local Government within that structure.

First though, it is important to define an emergency and a disaster. The terms tend to be used loosely and interchangeably in common English – but they mean different things. An emergency is an event which exceeds the capacity of the local area, so invokes the Emergency Management legislation. A disaster is an event which exceeds the resources of the jurisdiction, so invokes the Disaster Management legislation. Whether or not this occurs depends on:

- The nature of the hazard;
- The vulnerability of the location; and
- The community involved.

Not every fire results in Ash Wednesday. On that day, the temperature was extremely hot, the vegetation was tinder dry and the winds were phenomenal. This combination created a combination rarely encountered. Fire is always a hazard, southern Australia was extremely vulnerable and the fires impacted on densely populated areas. Everything was set for a disaster. Cyclones are always a potential catastrophe. Whether or not a disaster results depends on where the cyclone occurs and the people or assets in the area. If it is a hundred kilometres out to sea, it doesn't really matter. If it hits a city, the results are entirely different. If the community is prepared, the impact will be far less than if they are caught completely off guard.

Just because an event is not a disaster in the legislative sense, it doesn't mean that it isn't important.

- Personal tragedies and traumas are managed on a routine basis by the emergency services, police, fire departments and other groups with no real backup and no real problems
- Minor incidents require more coordination between the responding agencies
- Major incidents require people and resources to be brought into the local area
- Emergencies require a large scale response using significant resources from other areas and high level coordination
- Disasters exceed the resources of the jurisdiction and assistance is sought from remote locations.

But they all impact on the lives of everyday people and have huge impacts on the resources of the community. The terminology refers to the level of the response, not the incident itself.

Emergencies and disasters require the input of numerous Government and Non-government agencies to provide the services needed to address the situation, protect the community and to provide the support that people need when their world is falling apart. Coordinating these groups and establishing a command structure is a challenge which is addressed by the legislative provisions. Fortunately, disasters do not happen often but this means that those who manage them do not get much practice. Emergency services are well prepared for minor events such as car accidents, and manage them all the time but, as the situation escalates the need for management lessens and the need for leadership increases. Superimposed on this are the repercussions of making mistakes, if a minor accident is managed poorly, the community impact is low (although the personal cost may be high to those involved). If a disaster is badly managed, the community impact will be felt for decades. To make this even more challenging, emergencies and disasters rarely happen on fine, still, sunny afternoons. They are usually in the middle of the night or at 5.00 pm on a Friday, in appalling weather, in some awkward location or at the same time as a major event such as a Royal Show or the Easter weekend.

The State Coordinator (who is the Commissioner of Police) may declare an "Identified Major Incident" for a period not exceeding 12 hours or a "Major Emergency" for up to 48 hours. This can be extended with Governor's approval. The Governor may declare a "Disaster" for up to 96 hours. The declaration is revokable by Governor or may be extended by agreement of both Houses of Parliament. As soon as an event is declared to be an emergency incident, the legislation kicks in allowing the necessary resources to be made available. Similarly, when a disaster is declared, that legislation is invoked providing the legal framework for an effective response. If the State Coordinator makes declares an identified major incident, a major emergency or a disaster, and while that declaration remains in force, he must take any necessary action to implement the State Emergency Management Plan and cause such response and recovery operations to be carried out as he thinks appropriate. The powers of the legislation allow him to do that. The police are responsible for the overall management of the situation. Their role is to maintain law and order and to protect life and property. Specific tasks would include:

- Traffic and crowd control including the control of evacuation operations if required.
- Identifying the dead and injured and notifying next of kin.
- Establishing temporary mortuaries.
- Maintaining the security of property.
- Statutory investigative requirements.
- Assess the need for the registration of disaster victims and subsequent advice to the State Controller (Community Services).

Consequently, the powers conferred on police officers or those under their direction are extreme. They include:

- acquisition of property
- direct evacuation of people and animals
- enter/break into buildings etc.
- take possession of things
- destroy structures, animals & vegetation
- cut off fuel, water, drainage etc.
- prohibit movement of people
- remove people
- direct people whose responsibilities require their involvement

It is because of the draconian nature of these powers that the legislation is only invoked for short periods of time unless Parliament agrees to extend them.

In South Australia, there has only ever been one declaration of a state of disaster. That was Ash Wednesday.

The State Controller is assisted by the State Emergency Coordination Centre. This is a group of representatives of the participating agencies who maintain contact with their organisation and establish a communications network.

The structure is based on function rather than agency – this reflects the purposes of the Centre – i.e. to minimise the impact on the State, and to act as a unified body, not as a series of separate agencies.

The members of the functional services are defined by legislation but the relative prominence of each will depend on the type of incident that has occurred. The role of the State Emergency Coordination Centre is:

- Provide leadership
- Maintain oversight
- Prepare & review State EM Plan
- Provide advice to Government
- Undertake risk assessments
- Provide information to agencies
- Monitor capacity of agencies
- Coordinate the development and implementation of strategies and policies
- Monitor & evaluate response and recovery operations
- Other duties as directed by the Act or Minister of Police

In reality, this means that the State Emergency Coordination Centre must command, control and coordinate the on ground activities required to mitigate the situation.

Command:

- 'Command' is directing staff and resources to accomplish the organisation's role and tasks.
- Authority to command is established in legislation or by agreement.
- Command relates to individual organisations and operates vertically within an organisation.

Control:

- 'Control' is the overall direction of emergency management activities in an emergency disaster situation.
- Authority for control is established in legislation or in an emergency plan,
- Carries with it tasking and coordinating other organisations to meet the needs of the situation.

Control is very important. All government and most non-government agencies have a vertical pecking order – i.e. everyone is answerable to their own line manager who, in the case of government, is ultimately answerable to a Minister. In an emergency situation, the agency with the legislative responsibility for the incident controls it. This is usually the police but not always – for example if there is an exotic animal disease outbreak, the agriculture department is the lead agency. Obviously, every agency representative at the State Emergency Coordination Centre is a very senior person who is used to controlling their own personnel. It isn't easy to change the mindset from control to support – so the legislative provisions are essential to make the system work.

Coordinate:

- Coordination' is bringing together organisations to ensure an effective response
- Primarily concerned with the systematic acquisition and application of resources.
- Operates vertically within an organisation as a function of the authority to command and horizontally across organisations as a function of the authority to control.

So, who does what? Each of the agencies has their own reporting relationships and responsibilities but in the State Emergency Coordination Centre they must focus on their functional role are shared responsibilities – not just their own agency. The State Emergency Coordination Centre pulls all the collective knowledge and resources of each participating group together to achieve a common goal.

For the purposes of this paper, only Defence and those functional agencies in which Local Government plays a part will be discussed.

#### **The Defence Force:**

- To provide support as appropriate to the conduct of response and recovery operations by other Functional Services and in accordance with the policy and procedures contained in Australian Defence Force instructions for assistance to the civil community.
- Provides manpower and heavy machinery and will assist in any operation where their services are required.

#### **Agriculture and Animal Services**

Role: To provide immediate animal relief services, rehabilitation assistance to primary producers and as the lead authority, implement procedures in conjunction with national arrangements for dealing with an outbreak of Foreign Animal Disease or plant disease.

Comprises:

- Department of Primary Industries
- Local Government Authorities
- Australian Veterinary Association
- Stock Salesman's Association
- Farmers Federation
- RSPCA
- Bureau of Meteorology

#### **Engineering**

Role: In liaison with Police and/or lead response agency:

- The restoration and maintenance of essential infrastructure, including:
- Water supply and sewerage;
- Energy supplies - electricity and gas;
- Public and private buildings, including structural assessment, demolition and shoring-up;

- Public transportation infrastructure, ie. roads and bridges.
- To oversee the status of public telecommunications and when necessary liaise with service providers to give priorities for the restoration of services established by the SEOC.
- To provide engineering support to other Functional Services, eg the removal of debris, the construction of levees and other flood mitigation measures.

Comprises:

- Bureau of Meteorology
- Crane Owners
- Generator Owners
- Local Government
- Plant Owners
- Civil Contractors Federation
- DEH / EPA
- IE Aust., ACEA, ACAA
- Department of Primary Industries

### **Community Services**

Role: In liaison with Police and/or lead response agency:

- Establish Evacuation Centres to provide short term shelter, information and personal support services such as food, temporary accommodation, basic first aid, interpreter services and pet care.
- Activation of the National Registration and Inquiry System (NRIS) with linkages to Police Casualty Information and Disaster Victim Identification processes.
- Establish Recovery Centres as a one-stop centre for affected people to receive financial assistance, gather information and seek referral into the wide range of recovery services.
- Ensure information on practical advice and social/psycho recovery services is disseminated within the affected community.

Comprises:

- Dept for Families & Communities (Children, Youth & Family Services)
- Australian Red Cross
- Pastoral Ministry Services
- Insurance Council
- Interpreter and Translating Services
- Centrelink
- Lions Club
- Rotary Club
- Housing Trust
- Animal Welfare Unit
- St John Ambulance

### **Fire**

Role: To provide emergency response services by:

- Dealing with outbreaks of fire, both urban and rural, and the rescue of persons in fire endangered areas.
- Taking such measures as may be practicable to prevent the outbreak of fires.
- Dealing with the escape of a dangerous substance or a situation which involves the imminent danger of such an escape.
- Assisting in any other response or recovery operations for which the Fire Services' training and equipment are suitable eg. the provision of emergency water supplies and

the rescue of people trapped in collapsed buildings.

- In those areas of the State where the responsible emergency service is not located, to undertake the role and responsibility of that service until relieved.

Comprises:

- Metropolitan Fire Service
- Country Fire Service
- Local Government Authorities
- Bureau of Meteorology
- Department for Environment & Heritage
- Department for Primary Industries,
- Forestry

### **Health and Medical**

Role: To mobilise and coordinate health and medical services including the provision of:

- Hospital, specialist health and medical services required for the treatment and care of a large number of casualties, including dealing with psychological trauma.
- Field medical teams to assist in the affected locality and at Support Centres.
- Health and scientific survey teams.
- Disease control and other scientific and pathological services as required.

Comprises:

- Dept of Health
- Private Hospitals
- Private Hospitals Association
- Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service
- Australian Medical Association
- Australia Nursing Federation
- Institute of Medical & Veterinary Science
- Local Government (Health) Authorities
- Specialist Colleges
- Division of general Practitioners

### **Logistics - Transport**

Role: To coordinate the provision of transport support as required by other Functional services, whilst maintaining as far as practicable, the normal operations/activities of public and commercial transport services. Tasks for providing transport to other Functional Services might include:

- Movement of emergency equipment and personnel.
- Movement of emergency supplies and goods including water, fuel and food.
- Evacuation of people.
- Assistance for medical transport.
- Movement of earth-fill and debris.
- Public transportation infrastructure, ie. roads and bridges.

Comprises:

- Department for Transport, Energy and Infrastructure
- Public Transport Board
- Metropolitan Taxi Cab Board
- Bus Proprietors Association Inc.
- Road Transport Association Inc.
- Chamber of Shipping
- Commonwealth Department of Aviation
- Commonwealth Department of Transport
- Mobil Oil
- Local Government Authorities

Clearly, Local Government is a key player in many of these structures and local councils know their communities and terrain. It is important that councils are involved and know how to work the system before they need to know it. Remember, when you need good friends, it is too late to make them. The best management of an emergency or disaster occurs before the event – we cannot influence the nature of the hazard itself. Good planning can reduce the vulnerability of the location to some degree, but the main area on which we can have an impact is the community. This takes resources. By working together, we build the relationships that are essential in a disaster response and we share resources. Preparedness reduces the impact of the event itself and the cost of recovery – both financial and personal.

Don't be up the creek without a paddle. Be prepared and be involved.

### **About the Author**

Deb Kelly is Manager of the Animal Welfare Unit within the Department for Environment and Heritage in South Australia. As such she is responsible to Government for the administration and implementation of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1985 and the Dog and Cat Management Act 1995 and Executive Officer to the Dog and Cat Management Board. Under the State Disaster Plan, she is responsible for the management of pets across the State in the event of an emergency or disaster and has been a member of the State Disaster Committee. She is also a member of the South Australian State Committee for the National Plan to Combat the Pollution of the Sea by Oil and Other Noxious Substances and is responsible for co-ordinating a wildlife emergency response in the event of an oil spill.