



ACT Policing's

**Submission
to the**

**Inquiry into the
Operational Response
to the January 2003
Bushfires**

May 2003

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Preamble

ACT Policing is committed to continuous improvement and to refining operational processes and practices and accordingly, welcomes the opportunity to participate in the *'Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January Bushfires'*. Indeed since the fires, ACT Policing has undertaken an internal review of key aspects of emergency response and management. Areas for change have since been identified and improvements implemented, particularly concerning the operational capability of the Police Operations Centre at the Winchester Police Centre.

ACT Policing is keen to participate in this Inquiry, and in turn, to learn from its findings how current practices and procedures could be improved. This submission, however, does not address all criteria listed for consideration by the Inquiry. Comments instead are directed only to those issues that had some relevance for ACT Policing's officers involved in the emergency and where, from our operational experience, we can constructively add value to the review process.

To this end, the submission focuses on preparation, public information strategies, coordination, training, and communication issues. The following document is structured to explain ACT Policing's response in the emergency as well as those issues raised and discussed in relation to the Inquiry's terms of reference.

The submission opens by presenting the different types of roles that police services are expected to fulfil in emergencies. While it is common for police services to be involved in emergency responses and planning, their role has not been commonly or definitively articulated in either academic or industry journals. This is understandable as the role varies according to expectations but it is clear that the police convention and good practice of using command and control has been developed, well documented and practiced with effect in a range of circumstances. The functions of police services in emergencies are drawn from the experience of past involvement in such events and the refinement of emergency plans. The January bushfires shaped not only the tasks but also the expectations of other agencies, the public, and the police. Such factors had a direct bearing on what duties ACT Policing performed, and why members had particular responsibilities and made certain decisions.

Events leading up to and post the bushfire emergency on 18 January 2003 are sketched to provide a history of the action taken by ACT Policing. It is useful to consider police acts and decisions in light of the activities of other agencies and of the general fire threat. This is not, however, a comprehensive account, especially of the fire threat. This chronology is largely drawn from the attached report *'The Recovery Process for Canberra's Bushfire Emergency 18-28 January 2003'*, which was submitted to the Chief Minister in March 2003 to provide an account of the recovery process and the role I fulfilled as Territory Controller. This submission contains a number of recommendations outlining areas for further consideration, which it is believed, should contribute towards improved operational emergency outcomes in the ACT in the future.

Given the complexity of issues covered in this submission, particularly those concerning interpretation of the *ACT Emergency Management Act 1999*, I reserve the right on behalf of ACT Policing to supply additional material at a later date, which should be considered part of the submission for ACT Policing.

I trust that this information assists the Inquiry in its deliberations.

John Murray APM
Chief Police Officer
ACT Policing

The Role of Police Services in Emergencies

Police services have important and complex, if ubiquitous, roles and functions in emergencies. They perform tasks for both large and small scale emergencies and have built capacities to manage the range of activities involved in such situations.

Providing both care and control functions (see Hills 1997), the police role in an emergency is 'entirely without regard to the substantive nature of the problem, as involvement is based on the need to address something that ought not to be happening and about which someone had better do something now (from Fielding 2002:150).

Overall, the types of emergency functions police services undertake can be characterised broadly into four categories:

A) Overall strategic coordination and management of the response to (or security planning for) an event in order to ensure effective treatment of any threat as well as to maintain public safety and social order.

Police services are generally responsible for overall strategic coordination of cross-agency action and resolution of a range of issues that other emergency service agencies may not automatically address. In performing this role, police services consult and work with the community and organisations to approach matters in an orderly fashion. Not unsurprisingly, the importance and complexity of the coordination task increases with the magnitude of the event or emergency. Effective co-ordination relies on significant liaison and cooperation with other agencies, which a community policing philosophy and approach is well placed to develop. It also requires substantial intelligence and information exchange within the police service and with other bodies.

To this end, police services activate internal major incident procedures, which include establishing forward command posts and using field officers and the radio communications network to develop situational reports that provide real time Intelligence (Intel). This information is relayed to the Police Operations Centre (POC), the base for command, which collates and assesses information and need, and accordingly, deploys tactical and strategic resources. In doing this, the POC may secure and deploy out of area resources and apply them to assist the response to a particular event. The POC also manages cooperation and liaison with other agencies during the emergency/event with this interaction informing police decisions and action. As event security, and increasingly, terrorism, become focal points for emergency management and planning, police services will have key management and coordination roles, especially as such events are likely to involve multiple incident scenes, and diverse response criteria. In recognition of this role, police services are formally involved in emergency management arrangements and plans. It should be noted that police services generally coordinate emergency events, especially if the event involves significant loss of life or property.

B) Provision of services that facilitate the actions and effectiveness of agencies responding to either the threat (combat) or the impacts from the threat (recovery) in emergencies.

Police services undertake duties that involve a broad spectrum of functions ranging from fielding public and media inquiries to traffic control enabling other agencies to

do their job. For combat agencies this may mean ensuring that the inner perimeter incident scene of an emergency location is secure or may equate to working with other organisations on planning and undertaking initial 'crisis' recovery tasks such as staffing evacuation centres.

C) Maintenance of normal policing services during the emergency or event to ensure that the inherent social disruption associated with the emergency/event is minimised for the wider population;

During an emergency, police services need to be maintained in those areas not directly affected by the event. Without police maintaining a presence and ensuring order in non-affected areas, disorder and opportunistic crimes may occur, which could generate problems for the broader community. Officers also have continuing obligations to continue to protect people, enforce laws and undertake crime prevention in non-event affected areas as crimes occurring in these areas are significant issues for those involved and need to be addressed.

D) Jurisdictional police concerns in the emergency (not necessarily classified either as recovery or combat) that span many issues according to the nature of the crisis.

Police have specific duties that they undertake in emergencies in order to fulfil their pre-existing obligations and charters. Generally, ACT Policing's charter involves:

- protecting persons and property;
- undertaking crime prevention and detection;
- maintaining peace and good order;
- enforcing ACT laws; and
- developing and maintaining community participation in the provision of police services.

In an emergency, these responsibilities are emphasised as officers are responsible for protecting life and property. Police services may be called upon to:

- undertake ongoing threat assessment and abatement;
- be the first point of contact for, and response to, emergency calls and inquiries from the public;
- locate missing persons and assist with recording people's identification at evacuation centres;
- assess and investigate damage to property, injury and loss of life;
- collect evidence should the emergency involve potential criminal behaviour;
- oversee and assist with evacuations and identification of safe points/routes;
- undertake general risk assessment, crime prevention and deal with opportunistic crimes associated with the emergency such as looting;
- deal with public panic and unrest arising from an emergency, such as vigilantism, when a community is placed under stress and normality is suspended due to damaged infrastructure and services; and
- provide location and crowd control around the scene including road blocks.

Police officers, in carrying out their duties, are often confronted with moral dilemmas, needing to make ongoing, split-second risk assessments, significant timing and

judgement calls about such things as when to rescue citizens, when to evacuate, when to allow people to return to affected areas, when to leave areas due to the danger to officers and emergency personnel, and when to save property. Often in such circumstances, police officers, as with other emergency service personnel, are working in demanding, stressful and uncertain environments where communication technologies may be damaged, threats are dynamic, and there may be multiple and simultaneous demands for resources and attention.

Importance of preparation and training

Training and preparation are vital for effective management, action and reaction. In many instances, a general duties officer will be the first at the scene and will need to rely on their training, operational procedure and the authority of their uniform in order to assess, control and command the situation and determine the need for assistance (see Hills 1997).

To ensure an effective response, police services have developed highly-trained specialist units. ACT Policing has search and rescue, event security management and anti-terrorism capacities via the Special Response Security (SRS) team. Members of this team were instrumental in the response to the ACT Bushfire emergency.

ACT Policing has also been involved in emergency management planning and training. The Chief Police Officer (CPO) chairs the ACT's Emergency Management Committee, which is involved in the preparation of the ACT Emergency Plan (Plan), while officers are on Chemical, Biological and Radiological; Animal Diseases; Community Recovery; Flood Management and Airport emergency management working groups. To assist with cross-agency communication, Sergeant Steve Kirby has been appointed as the liaison officer with Emergency Services Bureau (ESB). The CPO in 2001 established the Emergency Services Forum, which involves the chief executive officers of each service and the Executive Director of the Emergency Services Bureau (ESB) to foster interagency cooperation on policy, communications and training issues. In addition, ACT Policing is involved in preparations regarding terrorism events, having specific tasks and obligations as defined in the National Counter-Terrorism Plan.

AFP officers attend training courses run by Emergency Management Australia (EMA). They participate in external as well as in-house disaster simulations to practice activating the POC and relevant emergency procedures. Significantly, in such exercises the POC served as the Territory Emergency Operations Centre (TEOC) and as the base of overall strategic command. These simulations have, however, never included a scenario where an Alternate Controller (AC) was appointed. Exercises have involved external groups and are increasingly including consequent management. For the most part, SRS team members and forward commanders have attended EMA training.

Police officers have also participated in Protective Security Coordination Centre managed training courses which provide discussion and operational based learning opportunities. This training is part of national counter terrorism training procedures with the emphasis on multi-agency response, and incident management for events such as terrorist acts involving explosions, biological, chemical and radiological accidents. Through this training, officers work through many of the issues associated

with major emergency management such as managing high levels of injuries, property destruction and public panic. Team leaders and members have participated in Olympic preparations and deployment as well as managed demonstrations and regularly manage security issues such as Summernats, building skills in crowd control. During the course of their duties, officers may also attend incidents such as anthrax scares, motor accidents and grass fires, gaining practical experience and skills in elements of emergency management.

After the fires, ACT Policing has increased its training commitment regarding emergency management. Recently, a week long command training course was held. A manager of the POC will also be appointed in the near future to work on testing the operational capacities of the centre and to undertake extensive training of member regarding use of the Centre. ACT Policing's Learning and Development Committee will also develop a team leader course that will develop emergency management leadership skills across middle management.

ACT Policing responsibilities during the January ACT Bushfires

The role and responsibilities for ACT Policing in the January bushfires covered all four aspects typically assigned to police services during an emergency. As the emergency involved a State of Emergency, the CPO was automatically appointed Territory Controller (TC) and obtained the following responsibilities:

- a) managing the response to, and the recovery from, the emergency by ensuring that agencies, organisation and other persons committed to dealing with the emergency were appropriately deployed;
- b) coordinating the disposition of other resources to manage the emergency;
- c) ensuring that appropriate emergency management was implemented;
- d) providing advice to the Minister of Police and Emergency Services about the emergency;
- e) undertaking activities in cooperation with other persons which the controller considers appropriate for the purpose of discharging his or her functions; and
- f) performing any other functions conferred by the Controller by the *Act* or any other law (refer to Sect. 14 EP 2001).

The TC has a list of actions to perform as stipulated in Annex E of the ACT Emergency Plan and has specific powers (please refer to Pt 3 Div 3.1 Sect 27 of the *ACT Emergency Management Act 1999*). Under a State of Emergency, the TC could authorise emergency service agencies including the police to enforce the order to evacuate people.

In the January bushfire emergency, all available powers were conferred to Mr Murray, the CPO. Following discussions with the Chief Minister, the TC also appointed an Alternate Controller (AC) (Mr Peter Lucas-Smith). The duties and authority of the TC following the appointment of the AC was and remains unclear. The appointment of the AC meant that the appointee was authorised to exercise the powers of the TC,

who, according to the *Emergency Management Act 1999* did not relinquish his responsibilities or powers. The *Emergency Management Act 1999* does not give any guidance as to the relationship between the TC and the AC. Following discussion with the Chief Minister, the AC immediately upon his appointment became responsible for fire management issues as well as all issues associated with recovery from the emergency. On Sunday 19 January 2003, the CPO resumed responsibility of the recovery process, allowing the AC to manage the response to the continuing fire threat. Details about the role Mr John Murray played as TC in the overall recovery process can be found in the attached report. During the course of the State of Emergency, Mr Murray acted in good faith believing he retained TC powers. Using these powers, he authorised ACTEWAGL to:

- enter damaged site to erect power poles and to bulldoze if necessary as long as safety was not compromised (18:25 hrs on 22/1/03);
- remove gas meters from 300 homes in Duffy and Chapman areas (23:26 hrs on 23/1/03); and
- restore electricity services (15:30 hrs on 24/1/03)

As stipulated in the Plan, ACT Policing's Media and Public Relations Coordinator was appointed Media Liaison Coordinator for the emergency and the POC at the Winchester Police Centre was activated as the Territory Emergency Operations Centre (TEOC). However, the allocation of responsibilities between the TC and AC resulted in some confusion about whether the POC or Emergency Services Bureau (ESB) command centre was the TEOC. In the end, the POC served as the control centre for recovery and police functions, while the ESB command centre at Curtin (nominated in the Plan as an alternate TEOC) serving as the command base for the fire fighting effort and fire-related media activities. Under this arrangement, media liaison, field communications and operations for police and the fire brigades were managed separately from two locations.

These responsibilities were quite different to those ACT Policing would normally exercise in smaller-scale emergencies such as grass fires, the Thredbo disaster, the recent helicopter crash, and car accidents. Typically, police officers working under operational arrangements, other than those stipulated in the *ACT Emergency Management Act 1999*, would coordinate the scene and response and enable other agencies to undertake their duties while police specialists would undertake specific emergency rescue functions as required. Under the *ACT Emergency Management Act 1999*, the Executive Director (it is unclear of exactly which organisation) also assists the emergency effort by facilitating recovery through:

- supporting the activities of agencies, organisations and other persons working in the area of recovery and welfare roles;
- ensuring the establishment of persons within the community to act as contacts in conjunction with welfare agencies or organisations; and
- in conjunction with other relevant agencies or organisations
 - establish priorities for short-term recovery of infrastructure and
 - assist in the re-establishment of infrastructure in accordance with these priorities (from Div 3.2 sect 35 & 36).

The bushfire emergency revealed a number of strengths and weaknesses in approach. Before discussing these in detail, a brief chronology of events and then the role of ACT Policing in the emergency are presented. They serve to outline and contextualise police actions and decisions, as well as highlight pertinent issues arising in the response to, and recovery from, the emergency.

The January 2003 Bushfire emergency- a brief overview

Please note that this history is largely extracted from the chronology presented in the attached report. For full bibliographic references refer to the attached report '*The Recovery Process for Canberra's Bushfire Emergency 18-28 January 2003*'. This section provides select material from ACT Policing communications to portray the kinds of tasks and pace at which events unfolded on Saturday 18. It serves to provide this action in light of the fire movement and other agencies' actions. It is not, however, a comprehensive log of policing tasks or acts nor a complete history of events.

Thursday 16 January 2003

- NSW was experiencing a state-wide fire emergency with fires extending from Canberra to the Victorian border. It is believed that most of the fires were the result of lightning strikes on 8 January. As part of this general fire activity, bushfires were burning in the Namadgi National Park (please refer to Figure 1) with the Bendora and Stockyard fires a focus for attention (ESB 16/1/03). Other fires of note in the region were the NSW fires at McIntyres Hut and Mount Morgan.
- The ACT ESB requested additional assistance from the volunteer NSW Rural Fire Service to combat the Namadgi National Park fires. Additional resources from NSW were supplied to the ACT effort (NSW RFS 16/1/03).
- Officers from the ACT Ambulance Service also attended at night back burning operations undertaken by ACT fire officers while the Commonwealth provided military assistance for the fire operations such as bulldozers and helicopters (ESB 16/1/03).
- The CPO and Commander Operations were briefed by the Executive Director, ESB in relation to the fires.

Friday 17

- NSW fire fighters worked to establish control lines for the fires west of the ACT/NSW border and had put in place containment lines near McIntyre's Hut. Their efforts were supported by the deployment of 11 aircraft operating in the Yarrowlumla rural fire district. The NSW Rural Fire Service (NSW RFS) estimated that the NSW fires west to the ACT border had destroyed 7000 hectares (ha) (NSWRFS 17/1/03 a).
- The ACT fire fighting effort had established containment lines around the south-eastern sector of the Bendora fire but there had been some outbreaks

from this blaze to the north and south. Water bombing and back burning continued for the Stockyard fire. A total fire ban was imposed from 17 January to midnight 21 January 2003 (ESB 17/1/03 b). ACT crews were also liaising with NSW fire fighting crews regarding managing spot fires from McIntyres Hut (ESB 17/1/03 a).

- The ACT Ambulance Service (ACTAS) and the Ambulance Service of NSW (ASNSW) supported the fire fighting and back burning operations in the Brindabella National Park.
- By that evening some spot fires which had escaped containment lines had still not been contained and the fire threat to property at Tidbinbilla was rated as serious with crews from the ACT and NSW deployed to undertake property protection. Later, NSW fire fighters combating fires at the west of the ACT border were forced to abandon their work on containment strategies as weather conditions deteriorated and the fire danger increased (NSWRFS 17/1/03 a and b).
- Officers of the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services (DEYFS), in their role as coordinators of emergency social services for the ACT, met with the ACT ESB and were briefed on the fire situation. From this, they commenced preparations for community recovery operations in case of a fire impact. Staff who would be involved in such an emergency response were placed on standby.
- ACTEWAGL officers met with representatives from the DEYFS re events. During the night ACTEWAGL had put sprinklers on their water treatment plant near Mount Stromlo as a precaution.
- An officer of ACT Policing, appointed to liaise with the ACT ESB during the previous week, advised senior managers that contingency plans involving police resources were in place and members who would be involved in a fire emergency had been contacted and were on call for the weekend.
- The Health Control Office was established at ESB.
- During Friday night and into early Saturday morning, ACT Policing patrols worked with the ACT Fire Brigade, providing traffic control in order to assist fire crews in their back burning operations and preparations in places like Tharwa. Officers also reported on the fires' progress specifically along Uriarra Brindabella and Cotter roads. Radio reports relayed early Saturday morning claimed there was sufficient smoke and ash to cause officers to use air-conditioning.
- Although agencies had been put on stand-by and had undertaken preparations, fire services were of the opinion that the fires would not reach residential areas of the ACT before Monday. Police acknowledged the advice provided to them.

Saturday 18

AM

- In the *Canberra Times* articles reported that fire authorities were urging residents to avoid timbered areas and notified the public that road and parks

around Tidbinbilla and the Cotter Road had been closed due to possible fire danger.

- The fires north, west and south of the ACT border broke containment lines. The fire at McIntyre's Hut had overnight initiated spot fires that crossed the ACT/NSW border and entered the north-west corner of the Uriarra pine plantation. The Bendora fire had also spotted and threatened properties in Tidbinbilla and Paddy's River Valley. Residents were contacted by ESB and alerted about the fires. Recovery contingencies were put in place. The Stockyard fire had spotted as well and was threatening property at Nass and Top Naas (ESB 18/1/03). Given the conditions, the NSW Rural Fire Service advised residents in Goobagandra, Talbingo, Brindabella, Adaminaby and Wollondibby Valleys to be on alert (NSWFFS 18/1/03).
- Weather conditions deteriorated as high temperatures combined with very low humidity and strong winds. Correspondingly, existing fires around the region flared up (see NSWRFSS 18/1/03).
- A number of police officers obtained information from fire services that indicated that the bush fires would pose a serious threat to the ACT and it was feared that they would reach suburban areas sometime during the day.
- Throughout the evening of 17 and early on the 18 January, officers from ACT Policing were sent from the POC to work at the ESB offices at Curtin in order to assist liaison between the two centres. They relayed fire information between the fire control room and the POC as communication equipment permitted.
- At 9 am the Police Operations Centre (POC) was activated in response to the need to manage police resources for the fire event, which had moved towards the ACT faster than originally predicted.
- At 9:30 am, a briefing was held at ESB offices that indicated that the McIntyre fire would threaten a number of suburbs regardless of which way it travelled and the Tidbinbilla fire would threaten southern Tuggeranong. It was forecast that Uriarra would be under threat by midday, the Cotter at 3 pm and Stromlo by 6 pm.
- An ACT Policing officer provided a preliminary briefing to the Coroner's office (approx. 11:15 am).
- At about 11:30 am ACT Policing was briefed by a representative from the ACT Fire Brigade, with the briefing indicating that the fires were significant and likely to cause disruption and damage. It was estimated that, given the conditions and fuel load, the fire would reach the urban environment of the ACT at about 6 pm that evening and the fire would have a radiant heat extending 500 metres ahead of the main blaze.
- From 11:30 am the AFP established two forward control posts, to monitor and report on the approaching fire and assist with evacuations if required. Development of evacuation plans were commenced for Holt and Duffy.
- Throughout the morning field reports indicated that the fires were moving faster than forecasted. The official impact time remained 6 pm.

- ACT Policing's forward command posts relayed reports to the POC throughout the morning while People Strategies, ACT Policing's human resources unit, altered normal shifts and developed rosters to provide coverage and extra staffing capacity for the fire emergency.
- Given the deteriorating conditions, Commander Operations informed the Chief Police Officer (CPO) that in her opinion the situation in the ACT fulfilled the criteria for declaring a State of Emergency. Adopting a worst case scenario planning and risk assessment approach, the fires were potentially heading towards vital infrastructure in the Stromlo area and suburban areas which would constitute a significant danger to the health and safety of ACT residents, property and the environment and would also cause significant disruption to essential services (refer to Section 20 of the *Act*). The emergency powers of the Territory Controller would be needed, specifically those:
 - directing the movement of people and vehicles,
 - giving directions to regulate or prohibit movement within, into or around the emergency area,
 - enabling the access to land and buildings within the emergency area using such force as necessary and reasonable in the circumstances; and
 - excavating land or form tunnels as involved in preparing fire breaks (refer to Section 27) .
- Although fire fighting research indicates that people, if they are well prepared, should be encouraged to stay with their houses to protect them from embers generated by the fire, residents especially in rural areas had shown a general reluctance to leave properties which could have been problematic in the case of worsening conditions. During the morning despite efforts encouraging rural residents to voluntary evacuate if they were ill-prepared to protect their properties, there were reports of members of the public later requesting evacuation from rural areas once the fire front had arrived. In some circumstances such as at the Uriarra settlement, police and other emergency services personnel were unable to respond to these requests due to the fire's intensity. The CPO agreed with this analysis and called for a meeting with the ESB executive officers, the Chief Minister, and the Executive Director, Department of Justice and Community Safety to discuss declaring a State of Emergency. Under a State of Emergency the powers assigned to the TC would ensure greater public safety including evacuation of reluctant residents if they were in imminent danger and enable greater coordination across agencies by centralising command functions at the TEOC.
- ASNSW Liaison Officer commenced working at the ESB while ACTAS on-road resources increased and ASNSW resources were deployed to increase the ACTAS response capacity.
- ESB established a significant information management section to provide regular updates to the community on the fires.

PM

- By midday, patrols were continuing to establish and evaluate road blocks. They checked the progress of fires and the safety of rural residents, and undertook evacuations in rural areas. For example, at 12:07 officers directed

voluntary evacuations from the Cotter area while at about 12:47 people were cleared from the Murray Picnic Ground while by 1 pm Cotter pub residents were advised to evacuate. Following the Cotter camping ground was cleared at 1:08 pm.

- At about midday, the Commander Operations relayed her concerns about the fires to the Executive Director of ESB.
- Via the media, the public were advised not to use roads west of the Murrumbidgee River or visit Murrumbidgee recreational sites and to take fire precautions around their homes. Existing water restrictions were lifted.
- By 1:13 pm reports were recorded of fires spotting at Cotter Road and by 1:19 pm reports of hot cinders raining down at Coppins Crossing were made while everyone including the fire brigade was evacuated from Williamsdale to Johnson Drive.
- By 1:49 pm reports were made that the fire was 3 kilometres from Uriarra Crossing. By 2:23 reports claimed the fire was 1 km from that location.
- From about 2 pm, the southern forward command post had instructed police officers to encourage people to evacuate if they were not prepared to stay and fight the fire. People approached police officers asking for advice on whether or not to leave their areas. Police recommended that unless their house was fully prepared according to the Bushfire guidelines – that they had proper protective clothing, sufficient resources and the physical ability to stay and defend their property - they should leave. Any people with children, who was elderly or infirm were asked to leave prior to the fire arriving. Those that remained to protect the property were regularly checked on by police officers where possible during the course of the afternoon to maximise their safety.
- At 2:15 pm there were reports that fires were heading towards Gordon and by 2:19 pm the Kambah pool area was evacuated.
- Police officers also removed sight-seers entering suburbs who were contributing to additional logistical issues such as traffic congestion.
- From around 2:30 pm visibility was down to 50 metres and gale force winds had developed at Duffy.
- Traffic congestion occurred throughout the Weston Creek area as people tried to enter as well as leave the precinct.
- There were reports that spot fires were in and around Tharwa, near the Tuggeranong Hyperdome, the Lanyon Homestead and some 7 kilometres from Gordon. Evacuations were undertaken of the Mount Stromlo Observatory with two rural fire brigade units staying at Mount Stromlo while everyone else left.
- At 2.45 pm the Chief Minister declared a State of Emergency, the first for the ACT. With the State of Emergency declaration, the CPO (Mr John Murray) was appointed Territory Controller and the ACT Emergency Plan Version 1/2001 was automatically activated. The CPO assumed the role of TC and was placed in charge of the emergency management and recovery process. Following discussions with the Chief Minister, the TC appointed an Alternate Controller (AC) who was to manage the fire fighting effort. The CPO

assumed TC in the capacity of the recovery process. A Territory Health Controller was also appointed who oversaw the provision of emergency medical services.

- As fires struck residential areas in the north and south of Canberra, police forcibly and voluntarily enforced orders to evacuate residents not capable of defending their property. SRS and other police on duty checked on those remaining to fight the fires in less high risk areas.
- At 2:50 pm Black Mountain was evacuated.
- During the afternoon the fire continued to move at a rapid pace on a number of fronts. For an example; by 3.03 pm police reported that a fire wall was heading toward Duffy. At 3.17pm a report claimed that a front had reached Warragamba Street, which was quickly followed up at 3.22 pm with another police report that a house was on fire in Duffy. While between 3:05 pm – 3:10 pm fires were 5 kilometres from a sub-station in Holt.
- Due to the nature of the fire fronts, police and emergency service personnel were confronted with fires that moved via embers deep into suburbs such as Duffy, Rivett, Chapman and Weston, and ignited structures away from the main front. The BP petrol station at Duffy was one example.
- Throughout the afternoon police officers maintained road blocks, removed sightseers from areas such as Mt Anslie, organised towing of vehicles obstructing access to burning areas, rescued people from burning houses and liaised with evacuation centre staff about medical services for displaced people. ACT Policing's Media and Public Relations unit provided press releases on road closures among other things.
- The POC was staffed with representatives from key agencies and hourly briefings were held.
- An additional police forward command post was deployed in Tuggeranong to enable the existing southern forward command post to focus on the Weston Creek area.
- Throughout the afternoon ESB issued standard emergency warning signals alerting the public about the fire during the afternoon as well as press releases.
- Police experienced difficulties coordinating responses from different fire services with police officers encountering situations where rural fire officers although at the location would not attend to an urban fire and vice versa. Police requests for fire fighting resources were often to no avail as there was insufficient fire fighting resources.
- During the afternoon police continued to evacuate residents at times without direct consultation with fire authorities as infrastructure damage affected cross-agency mobile phone communication.
- By approximately 3.30 pm the South Forward Command Post had relocated to Weston. As fires were moving towards the police complex, the post was relocated to Hindmarsh Drive, the only evacuation route from Weston Creek. Visibility was poor and traffic congestion extreme with traffic lights in most of Woden out, due to infrastructure damage.

- During the afternoon deaths and significant home losses were reported.
- The first of four evacuation centres were opened.
- ACT Policing continued to assist with evacuations, worked at the evacuation centres, undertook traffic duties, and maintained road blocks.
- Large numbers of people were reported as missing throughout the afternoon and during the following days.
- Throughout the afternoon and well into the night, the police continued to provide evacuations, road blocks and other forms of assistance. From 5:36 pm, for example, northern suburbs of Holt, Higgins, Hawker, Weetangera, Cook, Macquarie and Aranda were placed on alert. At 5:15 pm reports there were reports that fires had spotted into Curtin while by 5:25 pm there were reports that Torrens was affected. At 7:40 pm reports recorded that fires were at the base of Black Mountain.
- During the afternoon, police officers rescued many people and dealt with calls where people were feared injured or dead. For example, at 4:11 pm there were reports that 30 people were feared trapped in a hut in Chapman. At 6.21 pm officers evacuated elderly people who had no transport. There were other instances where elderly people refused to leave despite the proximity of the fire and their limited capacity to protect their property. Officers also found people who had locked themselves in their homes and had become trapped as the fire entered suburbs like Kambah. In some cases, people remained even though their backyards were on fire. Calls for assistance continued into the afternoon.
- Police officers also dealt with calls from distressed relatives who had lost contact with family members and feared for their safety. In response, they searched for people, despite the danger. Officers rescued burns victims, finding members of the public injured in cars and walking along burning streets. Officers took such people to safety, as well as assisted others who had collapsed and were found unconscious. During the afternoon, there were numerous reports of officers and members of the public fearing people had been lost as their houses and properties burnt to the ground and the occupants' whereabouts were unknown. While undertaking evacuations, and especially during searches and rescues, officers worked in areas where live electricity lines were arcing, electricity lines and burning poles and trees had fallen across roads, where there were actual gas lines fires as well as threats of gas line explosions, very low visibility due to the intense smoke, low clarity of sound as winds and the fire in some areas was very loud, and general debris on roads - all made the working conditions very hazardous and communication difficult. One team had to venture on foot into a burning street to rescue residents as the massive amounts of debris on the road prevented vehicle access. The same rescue police team working with an ambulance team, who happened to also be working in the area, rescued about 120 people in the first few hours of the fires impact in Chapman and Duffy. Due to the urgency of events, officers often relied on the public at the scene to tell them where they thought people were trapped and relied on their own as well as the police intelligence about the fires movement and location. Overwhelmingly, the citizens police encountered on rescue tasks were significantly disorientated,

confused, largely unaware of their surroundings, and in shock, with many unable to speak coherently and unaware of the degree of danger. This affected the responsiveness and ability of the public to follow instructions. Police officers would often manually assist dazed people into police vehicles and would transport them to safer areas. Officers also flagged down members of the public to provide lifts for those they had evacuated so the police vehicle and team could return and assist with more rescues and evacuations. In a small number of cases, people wanted to stay to protect their houses in streets where neighbouring houses were on fire. In such situations, officers had to physically remove them.

- Given the speed of the fire and degree of danger, police officers used their public address system and the police emergency message to notify people that they should leave the area.
- At about 8 pm the fire at the Weston Police Complex which had burned since the early afternoon was under control. A fire at Mitchell was reported at 8:10 pm while by 8:46 pm Banks was being evacuated and by 8:55 pm another fire was reported at Farrer Ridge. At 10 pm fire was reported at Latham. Major activity continued into the night with the radio network and police patrol activity quieting at about midnight.
- Police officers door knocked residents relaying information.
- The Department of Education, Youth and Family Services (DEYFS) in conjunction with ACT Policing established an information hotline - the Bushfire Information Service. The Department provided emergency payments for those displaced by the fires that were in need of clothing, accommodation, transport and medical supplies, and found people accommodation.
- Over the course of the day ACTAS and NSWAS attended approximately 54 cases of persons having sustained injury as a result of the fires, while the Canberra Hospital experienced its busiest day on record with 280 patients presenting to the emergency department with 3 serious burns victims transferred to Sydney.

Sunday 19

- The AC maintained his base at the ESB in Curtin to remain in close contact with the fire service management team. The TC moved the management of the recovery process to Winchester Centre. An arrangement was confirmed whereby the AC would continue to manage the fire fighting aspects and the TC would manage the recovery. Commander Newton managed the POC-Territory Emergency Operations Centre (TEOC) at Winchester.
- The TC requested that arrangements were put in place to hold the first formalised regular meetings (daily initially) of the Management Executive (ME), specifically focusing on recovery aspects.
- A systematic process was initiated to identify property loss and to follow up on persons still reported missing. Officers entered fire affected suburbs to assess structural damage with the fire officers as well as to report on safety matters and to undertake preparations for investigations regarding reports on deaths.

- ACT fire crews undertook an extension of the containment line. NSW crews worked on a continued fire threat around the Fairlight area (north-west to ACT), and managed to hold a fire in check east of the Monaro Highway while simultaneously dealing with spot fires started from this blaze. (NSWRFS 19/1/03 a and b).
- The immediate fire threat to the ACT eased as weather conditions improved. Authorities claimed that all ACT fires were under control by 4pm (*Canberra Times* 2003 b), although fires still burned in NSW.
- Infrastructure agencies such as Telstra initiated assessments of the damage to their networks.
- ACT Policing continued to advise the public on whether fire-ravaged areas were sufficiently safe to enable people to return to their houses. Officers continued to provide traffic duties and monitor road closures and dealt with looting in damaged suburbs. Police continued to allow only residents into affected suburbs due to safety concerns. Power poles, cables and trees littered streets made vehicle access difficult while burnt cars, burnt buildings which made them unstable and other debris posed health and safety concerns for those entering burnt sites.

Monday 20

- All recovery control functions were centralised at the POC-TEOC, at ACT Policing Headquarters, Winchester Centre, Belconnen.
- The fire that had impacted on NSW and the ACT reportedly covered 200,000ha (NSWRFS 20/1/03). Information indicates that the NSW rural fire service was undertaking back burning operations in the north and south of the ACT (ESB 20/1/03 a).
- The CPO chaired the first formal ME meeting focusing on recovery, which was held at the POC-TEOC, Winchester Centre, Belconnen. This was the first of daily meetings until Tuesday 28 January. As the fire threat receded, recovery tasks gained greater attention and resources.
- ME included chiefs or senior officers of the main emergency service agencies in the ACT including police, fire, health and ambulance services, and other key private and public groups covering utilities, welfare services, public infrastructure and government as required.
- At the first recovery ME meeting on 20 January, the issue of governance and accountability under the EP was discussed and confirmed. Agencies agreed to provide a representative at the POC on a 24 hour basis to ensure communication and centralised information exchange. The TC formally activated the emergency Sub-plans which were relevant to the recovery effort for the ACT. This focused on restoring infrastructure and responding to community needs given the degree of property loss, injury and deaths from the fires. Coordinators were formally appointed to manage the implementation of various Sub-plans; however, many representatives knowing their role as Coordinators (as defined in the ACT Emergency Plan) had undertaken recovery crisis work before the meeting.

- From this time, agencies continued to work on repairing infrastructure and to provide social services. Details of these activities are contained in the attached reports.
- At this, the first of many daily meetings, coordinators managing sub-plans were formally appointed and reporting lines, priorities and responsibilities discussed. ACT Policing's coordinator of Media and Public Relations was appointed as Media Coordinator responsible for implementing the Media Liaison Plan. This responsibility was returned to ESB on 22 January, given the use of CanberraConnect for information dissemination, and the ability of ESB staff to immediately post information on the webpage.
- Many coordinators had necessarily activated relevant sub-plans prior to the State of Emergency declaration as they may use the Emergency Plans and its sub-plans to guide responses and preparations for emergency, regardless of whether it would be of sufficient severity to warrant such a declaration. However, once the State of Emergency declaration is made, a number of functions, responsibilities and lines of authority alter. These will be discussed in more detail below.
- Fire officers undertook door knocks throughout Belconnen, Gungahlin, Hall and inner ACT suburbs in response to fires potentially threatening northern ACT. The POC-TEOC did not receive a copy of the pamphlets while the Police Communications area later fielded calls from the public worried about possible evacuations and fire threats as a result of the door knocks. At times rural fire officers were mistaken for police officers by members of the public. Interstate fire fighters also undertook door knocking at Banks and Conder, which caused a degree of panic as this appears to have been initiated by the individuals rather than coordinated by the relevant agencies.
- By the evening, alerts to residents in north-west Canberra had been issued given weather forecasts (ESB 20/1/03b). The fire at Burrumbidgee was a potential risk.
- The Health Control Team commenced planning for possible evacuations of north-side nursing homes and disability houses in response to weather forecasts. Plans were provided to the POC-TEOC.

Tuesday 21 – Saturday 25

- On 21 January more ACT suburbs were placed on fire alert and the fire ban extended (ESB 21/1/03 a and b). The McIntyres Hut fire had been of concern.
- Police established 4 forward command posts including a roving command, and deployed extensive resources across the ACT in anticipation of the potential for another fire event given information from ESB.
- Additional interstate fire fighting units from Queensland arrived to assist the ACT service (ESB 21/1/03 c). By Wednesday 22 January the fire threat to the north-west had eased given a change in weather. Containment work on the bushfire to the south of the ACT (from Mt Bimberi to the Murrumbidgee river) also continued (ESB 22/1/03). From Wednesday containment work continued and the fire threat, although remaining, diminished (ESB 24/1/03).

- Although fires still burned in the Namadgi National Park, fire breaks had been established along the ACT border (NSW RFS 22/1/03) and they no longer posed a direct threat to the ACT.) Fire fighters kept blazes at bay to the north of the ACT, dowsing spot fires using helicopters
- The Recovery Centre commenced operation at Lyons Primary School replacing the Evacuation Centres. (The latter ceased operation on 27 January.)
- ACT Policing paid considerable attention to maintaining public confidence. Double the normal number of police officers were deployed each shift during the emergency in order to build public confidence. The majority of police officers were deployed to fire ravaged areas and those places likely to be threatened by further fires. In addition, patrols were undertaken to ensure safety in high fire risk areas by preventing arsonists lighting fires. Over the fire emergency, 5 people were charged with arson, while a number of others were charged with looting in suburbs where houses were damaged.
- A police member was appointed to lead the investigation team for the Coronial inquiry into the 4 deaths from the fires.
- Police undertook recognisance in NSW to monitor fire fronts.
- Environment ACT prepared mass graves for stock lost in the fires with police officers assisting this task. The news of large wildlife losses in Tidbinbilla reserve was reported. Environment ACT also managed public panic chopping of trees.
- Police assisted with the destruction of injured stock and burials.
- A Bushfire Recovery Appeal was launched (Quinlan 21/1/03).
- Work was undertaken to identify a location for the disposal of demolition rubble.

Sunday 26

- Most agencies reported that the majority of their infrastructure and services had returned to normal.
- The demand for short-term disaster-related services had also dramatically reduced with the focus for community recovery moving towards dealing with the longer-term effects such as housing and psychological impacts.
- ACT fire fighters continued to patrol containment lines and undertook precautionary property protection in the north around Hall, surrounding NSW and Wallaroo areas while additional containment lines to the north west of Canberra were established (NSW RFS 27/1/03).
- Fires still burned in the McIntyre and Burrinjuck Dam areas. Fire fighting efforts using water bombing, and containment work continued (ESB 25/1/03; 26/1/03).

Monday 27

- Fires remained burning around the ACT to the north-east of Wee Jasper, in the south near Michelago, the north of the Brindabella National Park and in the centre and south of the Namadgi National Park. The fire ground was estimated to cover 227,935 ha (NSW RFS 27/1/03).
- Despite worsening weather conditions, the fires did not move as aggressively as to pose a direct threat to the ACT although residents were asked to be calm but vigilant.

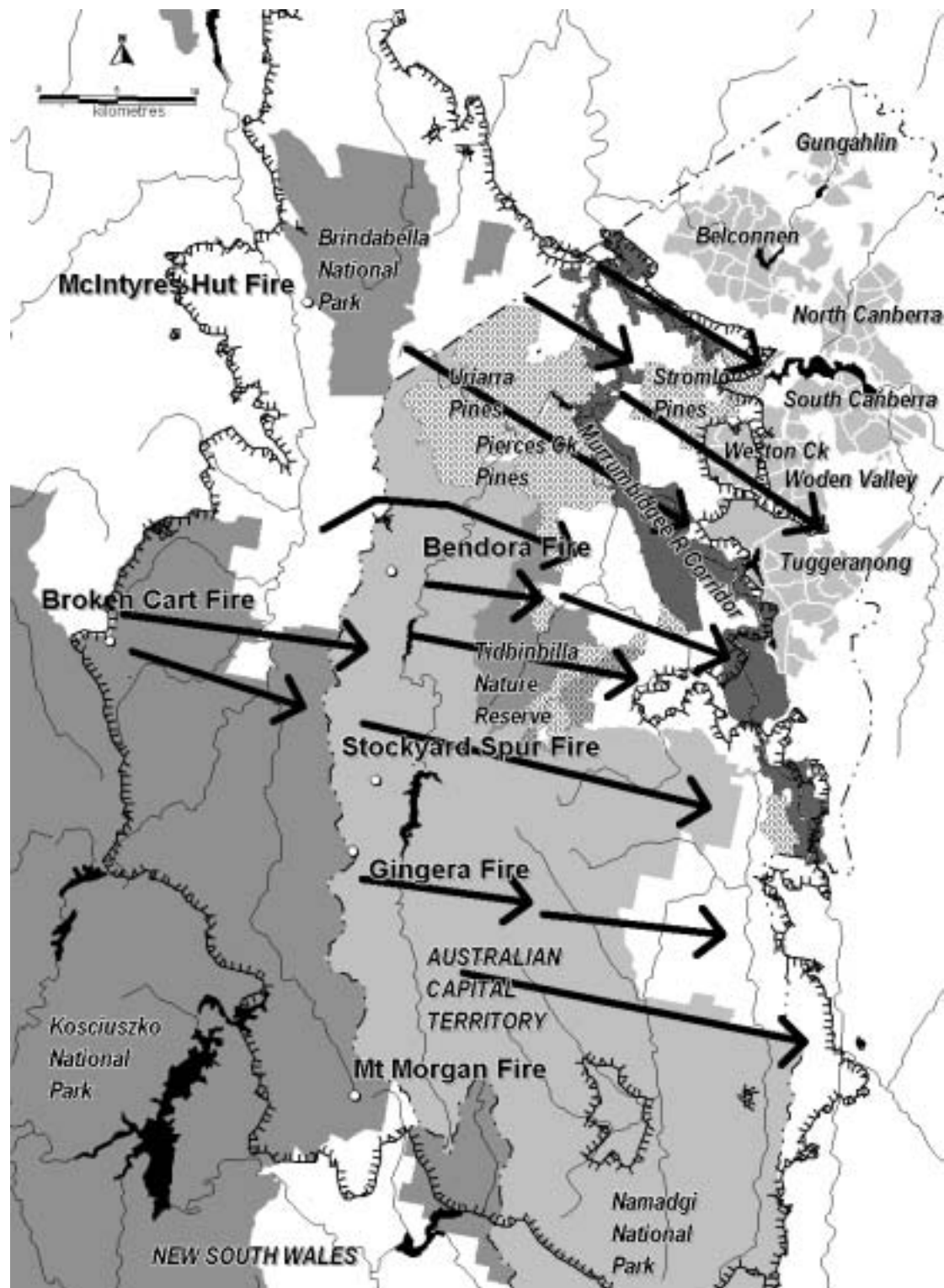
Tuesday 28

- The Chief Minister revoked the State of Emergency. With most services returning to normal, the need for emergency powers no longer existed.
- The Government announced the full membership of the Canberra Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, headed by Sandy Hollway. This Taskforce will continue the work of recovery, providing advice to those affected by the fires and coordinating the actions of organisations involved in the recovery process and the rebuilding phase.
- The ACT Government has been in and continues to be in close contact with the Commonwealth Government on access to Commonwealth Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements. The Commonwealth provides funding assistance aimed at alleviating the financial burden associated with the provision of natural disaster relief payments and infrastructure restoration. States and Territories are partly reimbursed for natural disaster relief once their expenditure exceeds certain thresholds.
- Agencies involved in the emergency response and recovery processes have initiated processes to debrief staff.
- The process of counting the costs and finalising statistics on the damage from the fires as well as the resources deployed to fight the fires and repair damage has been initiated in earnest as resources are now free to be applied to these tasks.

31 January

- The POC-TEOC was closed.

Figure 1: Fire Movement towards Canberra from 17 PM to 18 PM January 2003



Source ESB (2003)

Key:

- Arrows - represent fire movement
- Cross-hatching - extent of burnt area
- Shading - represents different land uses
- Circles- ignition points

ACT Policing's Operational Response

ACT Policing's operational response to the bushfire threat was governed by common law and legislation pertaining to police powers as well as specialised arrangements specific to fire events and emergencies. Prior to the declaration of a State of Emergency, ACT Policing's response was informed by the Memorandum of Understanding between the AFP and ACT Fire Brigade, the *Emergency Management Act 1999* and *ACT Policing's Guideline Supplement Handbook* instructions for major incidents. These instruments, in combination with standard policing powers and jurisdictional controls, provided ACT Policing with the responsibility to coordinate the outer perimeter of the incident scene. ACT Policing keeps this role unless a death or suspicious act occurs in the inner perimeter which converts this zone into a crime scene, which the police will necessarily control in order to secure and record continuity of evidence. As evident in the previous chronology, ACT Policing liaised with the ACT fire brigade and ESB about assistance regarding fighting the fire threat.

In fire emergencies, under existing instruments, ACT Policing takes direction from the fire brigade whether to evacuate people from houses and other buildings and, if so, when to do so.

By Saturday 18 January, ACT Policing, like many other services involved in emergency response, had been briefed by the ACT Fire Brigade and had, accordingly, activated emergency incident procedures and command structures. Such preparations ensured ACT Policing officers were in place to manage and respond to unfolding events and to minimise risk to life and property. In accordance with *ACT Policing's Guideline Supplement Handbook*, the Police Operations Centre (POC) was activated early Saturday morning, under the leadership of Commander Operations, and forward command posts were established in southern and northern suburbs. These posts were responsible for developing evacuation plans for Weston Creek and Belconnen suburbs, which were perceived on available information to be the most at risk.

Following the declaration of the State of Emergency and the immediate activation of the Emergency Management Plan, ACT Policing set about undertaking the functions allocated to it by the Plan.

Overall, the input from ACT Policing can be summarised as:

A) supporting the fire fighting effort by:

- supporting fire fighters when they undertook back-burning, mopping up and fire fighting tasks by removing sightseers, offering crowd control, maintaining road blocks and organising the removal of obstacles from areas that prevented fire fighting efforts;
- patrolling areas with information on board for the public
- assisting with information dissemination in northern suburbs about evacuations and fire preparations;
- evacuating suburbs, nursing homes, picnic areas and national parks on Saturday 18 January;

- establishing and monitoring road blocks in fire threatened and affected areas; and
- providing ongoing situational reports from AFP field officers and forward command posts;

B) coordinating the Territory emergency recovery response as the CPO served as the TC, and managing media liaison for the recovery process (from 20-22 January) (please refer to the attached report for further details); and

C) providing specific policing tasks in the emergency such as:

- maintaining public confidence via a high presence of officers in affected suburbs as well as across Canberra and undertaking door knocks;
- monitoring and controlling access to fire affected suburbs, including establishing a system of ID to ensure only residents entered the suburbs;
- determining when it was sufficiently safe to let people back to damaged areas;
- providing traffic duties in response to traffic light outages;
- investigating missing person reports;
- pursuing arson attempts, which resulted in five individuals being charged, preventing looting in affected suburbs and vigilante retaliation towards arsonists, responding to theft of street signs and generators and investigating bogus calls for donations;
- advising other agencies on a range of issues;
- providing patrols in high-fire-risk areas to prevent arson on extreme fire risk days following 18 January;
- briefing the Coroner and undertaking investigations for the Coronial inquiry;
- managing the media including preparing regular media releases on deaths, property loss and road closures, organising a media tour and dealing with many at times aggressive media inquiries, keeping the public calm, and dealing with media misinformation;
- dealing with protesters inhibiting clearing for containment lines and removing sightseers specifically at Weston Creek, Mt Ainslie and Tharwa;
- providing liaison officers who worked with key agencies;
- having officers attend community events after the fires to build community good will and social recovery; (they also received thanks for their efforts);
- rescuing people from burning cars and houses;
- dealing with ad-hoc issues such as a impersonation of emergency services personnel, undertaking static guard of the ACT Government Analytical Labs damaged in the fires, managing inquiries from Embassies about the involvement of foreign nationals, and dealing with the public over obtaining copies of property damage so that people could inform utilities and insurance firms. This also involved liaison with other agencies;
- collecting field intelligence on damaged areas like Mt Stromlo and on fire progress and location;

- establishing portable base radio stations and communication contingencies;
- providing back up support to the ESB media unit by lending staff and providing overnight press releases from 19 January as ESB closed its media unit overnight;
- providing SRS assistance to NSW for fires further south during 30 January;
- logging block and section numbers of houses damaged or destroyed in the fires;
- briefing politicians;
- providing welfare services;
- organising and liaising with military over assistance;
- maintaining a level of normal policing services;
- assisting with managing evacuation centres and identifying assembly areas; and
- jointly establishing an information hotline with the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services; and

To perform these duties required ACT Policing to manage its staff and other available assets. This included:

- rostering ACT Police, NSW Police, and AFP National officers;
- ensuring adequate rest for officers and smooth hand overs between shifts to maintain effective service levels;
- obtaining extra equipment and managing identification issues and taskings for additional officers on duty;
- providing safety warning and monitoring the health and safety of officers including providing asbestos information and protection to members working in damaged suburbs;
- providing welfare services to personnel and supplying these services to officers to help them deal with members of the public refusing to leave dangerous areas;
- maintaining member confidence and welfare, especially those who lost homes, by the Commissioner and the Executive being in the field, visiting members and assisting with the police response;
- accommodating extra police resources who had come to the ACT to assist the emergency effort;
- managing and activating the POC which ensured officers had resources and direction;
- protecting and fixing computer facilities affected by the fires at Weston including activating backup systems; and
- protecting police stations from fires.

Having identified some of the key duties and services provided by ACT Policing in the January 2003 bushfire emergency, the issues arising in relation to the current Inquiries terms of reference are discussed below.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

1) the preparation, planning and response to the bushfires and of strategies for the evaluations and management of the bushfire threat and risk

During the emergency, ACT Policing officers had to make significant judgement calls in response to the bushfire threat. The ESB had provided briefings on the fires which indicated that the fires had the potential to be a significant event. Accordingly, organisations put measures in place and staff on stand-by for a large scale emergency on Friday 17 January. From patrol reports, the fires were, however, more intense and moved at a greater speed than forecasts issued by ESB on 17 and 18 January. By Saturday, patrols were reporting how quickly the fires were moving and that they were at numerous places in the ACT.

Despite briefings and making preparations prior to Saturday, ACT Policing officers were confronted with an unpredictable, volatile and very intense fire that many experts have since claimed could not have been controlled. Experts have claimed that general ideas of wildfires movement and speed might need to be adjusted as fires appear to move more quickly than previously predicted with the ACT fire movement pattern indicating even greater speed (refer to ABC 2003). Few ACT Police officers had ever encountered such a fire.

In such extreme circumstances, ACT Policing officers had to make many judgement calls based on field intelligence, and based on their inability, at times, to contact fire personnel. In such circumstances, police officers used common law powers and their duty to protect people from injury or death (refer to AFP Act) and undertook evacuations without direct instruction from fire personnel. Given communication difficulties and the conditions, ACT Policing had to decide when to initiate voluntary evacuations in suburban Canberra. The mobile network jammed and land lines went dead as power poles were damaged. During peak periods of the fire, there were reports that officers could see only a few metres ahead due to the smoke, and it was raining embers as well as debris. Evacuation routes from suburbs had to be altered on the spot as the fire entered suburbs and moved at an incredible pace. Police officers relied on their radio system for communication but this was incompatible with the communication networks used by other emergency services, especially the fire brigade. Even the POC did not have a consistent and direct line of communication with the ESB control centre (and thus the fire radio control room) due to technical difficulties. There were also many instances where police officers worked in areas where there were no fire crews on hand to consult, as fire fighting resources were needed on so many fronts. When requests for assistance from fire fighting crews were made by police often such assistance could not be provided, given insufficient resources. Police often worked in suburbs where residents had not been generally notified or prepared for a major let alone extreme fire event with suburbs housing many elderly people and family groups. There were also many unaccounted for residents as people had as on any normal Saturday during the January school holidays left their homes for activities elsewhere or were away for the weekend. At times, at the height of the emergency police officers were planning for the evacuation of 5 suburbs simultaneously. Further, in an urban context there were many potential secondary dangers such as exploding gas, arching electricity lines and debris on roads that would affect general access and the ability to move large volumes of people.

There were also reports of people trapped in houses and needing to be rescued as the speed of the fires resulted in the need to evacuate people quickly. The difficulty of safely removing residents from fire affected areas was heightened by the shocked state of many residents, who had become very disorientated and unaware of their surroundings and vaguely responded to directions or instructions.

Under such conditions and evacuation logistics, the police approach was to evacuate areas prior to them becoming high risk situations which would then place officers and the public in much greater danger of being injured or potentially losing their lives. Police officers exercised their primary concern to protect life and only fought to save property when life would not be endangered. Ideally, determining priorities and the timings of evacuations would be undertaken by, or in consultation with, the agency with the greatest expertise of the event (e.g. the fire brigades) but often, as mentioned, this was not possible.

There arose conflicts of opinion between ACT Policing and ESB officers regarding the most appropriate time to evacuate rural residents on 18 January. Police urged residents to evacuate while ESB officers supported many locals who were keen to stay to defend their properties. It is recognised that many rural homes can be saved if residents stay and fight embers, and it is common practice to do so in rural areas. More generally, both rural and urban fires policy encourages people to stay with their homes as long as they are prepared, as it is recognised that such action will save many homes and late evacuations can be more dangerous than remaining with homes. However, this strategy is only appropriate if residents are well prepared, there are accessible exit options should the fire front approach properties and/or water pressure drop to an unusable level and there are preferably fire tankers and fighters to assist residents. Police officers felt, in some cases, residents in both rural and urban areas were relatively ill prepared especially given the weather conditions, the relative fuel loads in gardens and pine forests, and the fire's intensity and speed. Rural residents' reluctance to leave was one of the key considerations for police officers seeking a State of Emergency.

During the course of the day, there was less reluctance by residents to leave areas; however, there were a number of situations where rural residents refused to leave. Police then confronted a situation where once the fire entered suburban areas, residents requested assistance from emergency personnel to leave the area. Police officers were concerned that this scenario and demand would be magnified many times in urban areas. Concerns about the ability to manage such requests on a large scale, as would be the case in urban areas, was magnified by the arrival speed of the fires in suburbs, which had arrived many hours before originally predicted.

Later in the day, police working in Canberra suburbs had to forcibly remove residents. Some residents' refusals to leave were due to uncertainty and unpredictability of the situation.

Information on the fires had under-estimated their ferocity and speed, although sufficient concern and warnings about the fire's potential had been made by ESB, thus ensuring emergency services were on stand-by. During the 18 January information relayed through consultations and discussions with the ACT Fire brigade differed to that being relayed from the ACT Bushfire service. Such variation in information could have been reconciled through greater coordination of fire information.

Determining access to suburbs

During the bushfire emergency, police officers managed access to damage suburbs and those under threat. Most road blocks were used to ensure emergency services personnel had access to the fire or damaged areas and that their work could proceed relatively unheeded as well as to ensure that the public could move around Canberra safely. Many burnt suburbs had secondary dangers such as arching electricity and power poles on roads and a few areas became crime scenes. Road blocks altered quickly with time as they responded to the fire's movement. At times, officers at road blocks were confronted with people who wanted to return to suburbs to help family members or defend their properties. Only where it was considered safe to do so did officers let residents into affected or threatened areas.

Benefits of the ACT Emergency Plan for preparation

The ACT Emergency Plan and related sub-plans served as good preparations for the emergency response. Having existing emergency management plans was instrumental in coordinating and organising the recovery response. Having well-defined roles, responsibilities and sub-plans enabled coordinators to activate relevant plans and agencies in preparation of the bushfire event. Under the sub-plans, coordinators have a high level of autonomy, which was beneficial.

Each agency involved in recovery had its own operating procedures, resources and chains of command, which were vital to coordinating and delivering resources where they were needed. Given the relative autonomy being exercised by agencies prior to the emergency and in its first 2 days, these in-house resources coupled with the existing sub-plans outlining responsibilities ensured that work proceeded effectively.

During the emergency as fires threatened the ESB offices, there was consideration given by those based at the ESB offices of relocating its operations. Developing a list of additional offices suitable for use as an emergency command centre (with access to sufficient space, Commonwealth and ACT Government IT servers and radio networks) may be beneficial in case one of the two listed TEOC centres becomes dysfunctional. It would seem better to avoid spending time on deciding where to relocate at the height of an emergency.

There are, however, a number of ambiguities in the *Emergency Management Act 1999*, and Plan which could potentially constrain operational outcomes in other circumstances. In the ACT January 2003 bushfire emergency, agencies cooperated and had good relationships so anomalies in the law were less obstructive than they might otherwise be. Such legal ambiguities, nevertheless, could be reviewed and strengthened to avoid potential problems in the future.

Legislative issues

As a result of the experiences of the fire emergency ACT Policing has reflected on events and identified the following issues as potential areas requiring additional thought. Under the legislation the AC and TC roles and functions were unclear. Further during the course of the emergency, it appeared that according to the ACT Emergency Plan and *ACT Emergency Management Act 1999* in major emergency normal procedures and lines of responsibility for recovery are altered. Such change has the potential to cause confusion and generate a split between common practice

and the Plan. There were also discrepancies between the Act and sub-plans with practical examples used to illustrate the implementation of some sub-plans not necessarily adhering to the *Act*.

These issues for the *Act*, the Plan and the sub-plans should ideally be addressed to ensure consistent, clear and practical lines of communication and responsibility. In the recent emergency, organisations activated the plans and undertook the recovery process effectively. This was assisted by the high-level of respect and cooperation among agencies and representatives long-standing involvement and knowledge of ACT emergency management. Without such good will and knowledge, and possibly in a more complex and larger emergency, such discrepancies may become major issues. It is beyond the current paper to fully explore or espouse such legal issues, however, ACT Policing would willingly contribute to processes implemented or identified to examine and consider these matters further.

2) ESB management structure, command and control arrangements, and public information strategy

Public information

The Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS) messages were an important feature of communications and public information during the emergency. Their use could be enhanced by numbering them. This would enable the public to know when they had been updated.

At times, decisions taken by police officers at the street level appeared contradictory to the messages being broadcast by the media. For example, during the height of the fire storm on Saturday afternoon, ESB appears to have issued some media releases and SEWS messages that did not inform the public that evacuations were underway, and in some instances, encouraged people to return to suburbs that were affected by the fires.

Such confusion seems to be the result of communication problems across the services and between the ESB and POC control centres. This generated difficulties in the exchange of real time Intel about dangers and risks, and hampered attempts to gain an overall picture of where assets such as police patrols, fire tankers and SES crews were located. There were instances where police officers were rescued by chance by passing SES teams as the fire had moved rapidly and caught them unawares. Had there been better overall information relay and coordination, and therefore, knowledge about the location of the fire as well as the position of agency assets at any given time, such lucky escapes may not have been needed.

Once a State of Emergency was declared, the TC should under the *Act* authorise SEWS messages. This did not appear to happen as the AC and ESB were managing communications for the fire response and had issued SEWS messages prior to the declaration. There may need to be greater alignment of the tasks that occur in practice to the course of action and responsibilities stipulated in the Plan. This is especially relevant where the ESB as the umbrella organisation for the emergency response will initiate and coordinate activity up until a State of Emergency is declared and there may be a degree of disruption if duties are altered.

Communication difficulties from having two control centres

There were significant information and communication problems from having two control centres. The Plan refers to a Territory Emergency Operations Centre (TEOC) and specifies that the POC at Winchester Police Centre be the venue for the TEOC. The POC has served this function in simulation exercises. The ESB offices at Curtin are identified as the alternate TEOC. In the fire emergency, there were two command bases managing different aspects of the emergency. A strict interpretation of the Plan would be that it was not an option for the TEOC to operate from two different premises, but that instead the TEOC ought to have been based at either the POC or ESB. In practical terms, it was decided that the ESB would manage the response to the fires from its own premises and that ACT Policing would manage the recovery from the fires from the POC. However, especially early on, this distinction was blurred and it would have been preferable to have everyone at one venue to expedite the exchange of information and skills.

While this structure enabled the fire fighting and police efforts to continue uninterrupted during the emergency, it did generate significant cross-service communication and coordination problems. There were times, for example, when it was difficult to secure a phone line between the two centres. At one stage, officers at the POC could communicate with the ESB office and gain fire updates only by leaving a telephone line open and passing the phone from one person to the next. Police liaison officers at ESB would attend briefings and relay this material by phoning the POC using mobile or landline. POC officers wanting to relay information or ask questions in light of police intelligence would phone the ESB based members. This was problematic given police officers at times were unavailable as they were attending briefings, and there were limited phone connections between the two centres due to infrastructure damage and the use of one main line for communication between the two centres.

Members based at the POC had no other ready way to secure fire information except for relying on police field patrols. ACT Policing relied on its patrols and Communications network to obtain up to date, situational reports on the fires' locations and movement.

The communication difficulties between the two centres also affected the speed at which fire maps and other data were sent to the POC. On occasion, by which time such information was received the data was out of date, such was the speed of the fires.

In addition agencies working on recovery aspects did not necessarily know in the first few days which centre to contact to relay information, seek advice or direction.

Media liaison

Most agencies involved in fighting the fires or in recovery had their own media units and liaison officers and issued their own media releases. Under the ACT Emergency Plan, government agencies are to coordinate their media output via a Media Liaison

Coordinator. This stipulation does not necessarily apply to private firms. The Coordinator's effectiveness and media management generally, therefore, relies on good relationships and cooperation with private firms. This was demonstrated in the emergency.

There was, however, a delay in formally appointing a Media Coordinator. In the first days of the emergency, an allocation of work was established between the ESB and ACT Policing's media units. As the key agency managing the threat response, ESB was in charge of media and communications prior to the declaration. Once the State of Emergency was declared and the ACT Emergency Plan activated, the Media Liaison Coordinator was automatically appointed as the role, its responsibilities and nominated contact were stipulated in the Plan. The Coordinator should ideally coordinate all media releases and contact and be based at the TEOC while another media centre was to be developed at the ACT Legislative Assembly building. While other agencies may have media centres and liaison officers, their responses should be coordinated, with media releases and contact managed overall by the Coordinator. This did not happen as it would have generated practical difficulties.

It was impractical to re-locate and centralise all media functions at the POC as this would have interrupted ongoing and much needed work already occurring at the ESB command centre. Further, it would appear that some ACT Government officers could not readily access ACT Government servers from the POC, and officers dealing with fire information would be removed from the fire radio control room as it was not apparently feasible to relocate this operation to the POC. There was also not enough space to centralise all media functions at the ESB offices. Consequently, the Media Liaison Coordinator worked from the POC and focused on police and recovery matters while media officers at ESB control centre worked on fire related media issues. This was a result of the specific roles taken by the TC and AC and the corresponding separation of police and fire fighting bases of operation.

Problems in coordinating a unified response, however, emerged from this arrangement as infrastructure damage affected communication and information relay between the ESB offices and POC. Instead, each media unit relied heavily on their respective services for information in the early phase of the emergency, with the division and physical separation of media roles.

There were real benefits from dividing the media functions but also problems as it prevented a consistent line being taken in media releases issued from ACT Policing and ESB, which in turn appears to have fuelled media misinformation and public anxiety. There was a degree of community panic and loss of confidence in emergency services agencies immediately after the fire event. This was generated in part by the negative stories run by the media in the first few days of the emergency, the natural response to the severity and unexpectedness of the emergency, and the perceived lack of accurate and regular information from officials. Radio stations gave significant air time for callers to ring in and share experiences but also to provide information on fires, their locations and available resources as official updates were not placating public alarm and need for information.

Media releases and information dissemination by emergency agencies was seen as contributing, in part, to the drop in public confidence. Given the content of previously issued media releases and the sheer volume of media work for ESB, there was an agreement on Sunday 20 January to redirect media inquiries from ESB to the POC. On Monday 20, when communication infrastructure improved further, the Media

Coordinator centralised information dissemination with all media releases to be cleared by her. This was stipulated at the Executive Management meeting held on that day.

There continued, nevertheless, to be general communication difficulties. For example, officers at the POC did not see pamphlets for a letterbox drop on the 20 January. The ACT Policing's Media and Public Relations team experienced ongoing difficulties securing a shared line or getting consistent messages in media releases released by ESB and had to formalise methods of information relay between the two units on 21 January. These were not necessarily adhered to. By 22 January media functions including those about recovery predominantly returned to ESB. This was due to the use of CanberraConnect for information dissemination. ACT Policing media officers, however, requested that information be relayed to the POC to ensure that ACT Policing had relevant facts in an appropriate time frame to respond to changing conditions or risk. This was in response to delays in receiving pertinent information prior to its public release by ESB. Given the issues that emerged during the fires and the importance of maintaining public calm and confidence, media arrangements require further consideration.

Issues of media liaison and coordination highlight the need for one physical or at least 'virtual' centralised information collection and dissemination point, definite coordination and sharing of information to obtain a common approach, and the benefits of senior officers liaising and agreeing on the content of media releases.

Further, the media and public information strategy relied heavily on posting information on CanberraConnect. While this was beneficial, it did not necessarily assist those in affected or threatened suburbs where power and phone lines had been damaged. In these areas, radio was the key source of information. Running an education campaign about where the public may source information in an emergency might be worthwhile while developing less technically reliant forms of information relay might be beneficial to overcome situations where infrastructure damage occurs.

There may also be the potentiality that emergency service agencies will hold differing views on communication tactics and therefore, on the messages to be broadcast. Methods to resolve this may need to be investigated especially where there is an AC and TC and two associated media units operating and commanding different aspects of the disaster as was the case in the January fires. Some differences reflect jurisdictional responsibilities and operational cultures and approaches between emergency services but in a major event when protocols are tested, mechanisms for quick resolution of differences need to be available.

There are also resourcing issues for media management that are worth further consideration. Both ACT Policing's and ESB media units called on extra staff to assist them. These officers also needed to coordinate and liaise with private sector groups (like infrastructure utilities) who issued their own releases. The job of managing and coordinating the media is vital, a fact well recognised in the ACT Emergency Plan. Media resources were stretched and appear to have needed additional capacity as there seems to have been a period at the height of the emergency where media releases were re-broadcast with by then inaccurate and potentially dangerous information while SEWS messages appear not to have been updated regularly. This is problematic given the importance of the broadcasts for informing people, retaining public trust and keeping people safe.

Despite such problems with media output, it appears that on the ground communications with the public in affected suburbs ensured evacuations proceeded quickly and that the loss of life was minimised, despite the high loss of property.

Future scenario planning and training exercises could potentially benefit from greater focus on media coordination and arrangements. Identification of additional resources that can readily be called upon to work on media issues in a major emergency may be beneficial.

3) the coordination and cooperative arrangements with other ACT and interstate, Commonwealth and non-government agencies, including utility providers, for managing such emergencies;

Extra resources obtained via interstate cooperation and volunteers

The cooperation of agencies on the Management Executive was instrumental in getting initial recovery completed in good time. Extra resources especially staffing resources were also delivered due to cooperative arrangements with interstate services or parent agencies. Many organisations also called on reciprocal help arrangements. These channels of assistance were vital for an effective response.

Community volunteers were also instrumental in ensuring agencies and groups could fulfil their charter and could obtain additional resources. Police Volunteers, for example, assisted with catering while volunteer-based community groups also worked on community recovery functions and the St John Ambulance helped with medical services. Cooperation was also obtained from the community which was instrumental in the recovery process. Community support in following instructions or providing resources was invaluable.

ACT Policing called on extra staff, which required additional equipment and posed challenges about how to identify police officers from interstate. During the emergency officers went to stores to obtain additional clothing and supplies and borrowed from AFP (National) assets like cars and satellite phones. Since the fires, ACT Policing has identified methods to ensure such equipment is readily located and made available. Further, some cars that are not ordinarily used in operational duties have been equipped with lights and other equipment (such as sirens and public address systems) to ensure their maximum availability and flexibility in deployment.

4) the adequacy of ESB equipment, communications' systems, training and resources

Information relay between ESB and the POC was problematic on 18 January. Throughout Sunday 19 January the Fire brigade representative at the POC experienced difficulties obtaining fire information from the ESB command centre. Although information exchange did improve in the following days, it remained unreliable and there were concerns about its quality. ACT Policing patrols were, consequently, used to check on fires progress and location.

In light of constructive criticism and reflection about the emergency, ACT Policing has undertaken a review of the POC capacities. Although listed as the command centre for an ACT major emergency operation, the POC does not have ready access to ACT Government servers as ACT Policing is a Commonwealth body providing contractual services to the ACT Government. This meant that ACT Government Departmental representatives based at the POC could not readily access their home drives and intranet sites when working on recovery efforts. This is currently being addressed.

ACT Policing also identified issues in electronic capabilities and in recording information, especially as power outages affected the ability to type records directly to PROMIS, ACT Policing's computer system. Alternate methods of documentation will be introduced and additional officers allocated the role of recording events in future emergency operations. The POC has also been equipped with additional stores of protective clothing as many officers (with the exception of SRS members) lacked specialist fire clothing, although they all have leathers jackets and hats as per stock dress code and fire blankets in their cars.

The Fire Planning Cell provided very useful information during 18 January. There was close and constructive information relay between AFP officers based at the ESB command centre and the cell. This was instrumental to the timely calls of evacuations.

Technical communication issues

During the fires, mobile phone coverage was lost. This posed safety issues for officers as well as limiting planning and operational responses. As mentioned earlier, there were problems securing phone communication between the two control centres. There seemed to be no radio links between the two centres while crews from different agencies in the field could talk to their respective command bases but could not radio each other. There may be gains from having more than one operation and command base for the different services but these offices need to have fail-safe and quick methods of communication.

ESB equipment

The fire control room at ESB was too small to contain additional operations. This strained information flow about the fires. From reports of those based at the POC, the ability to co-locate and have representatives from many agencies at one centre proved very useful. ESB offices are poorly laid out for central information exchange with the Executives, fire planning unit and fire radio control room physically separated. While it is certainly useful to house all emergency services in one building, the physical layout needs to be designed in such a way as to facilitate cross-service communication, preferably by having the executive control room located near or with immediate access to information being relayed from the field units of the respective services.

As evident from the fire experience, there is a need to co-locate command and communication functions of emergency services including ACT Policing for major emergency responses, where possible. This should facilitate information exchange between agencies in the emergency situation as coordination is vital. A course of action worth considering is re-visiting the idea of developing a Joint Emergency

Services centre (JESC). There was a proposal for a Woden JESC but this proposal, although initially supported, was in 2002 cancelled. For the last seven years, the Gungahlin JESC which houses representatives from the fire, ambulance and police service have enjoyed efficiencies and cost savings. This, however, does not have command communications capacity.

While the CPO and a number of liaison officers were based at the ESB control centre on 18 January, due to the physical layout of the centre, extra policing resources were allocated to tasks such as communication relay within the ESB and well as to the POC. With better design and facilities, some of these policing resources may have been able to be used for different functions.

The suitability of ESB as a command post for recovery and response functions in terms of space and equipment needs greater consideration as the ESB offices does not currently have sufficient space or the technical equipment to serve as an overarching command centre. Revisiting the idea of developing a JESC would have merit.

Greater integration and use of field reports from different agencies

By activating their procedures for managing a major incident, ACT Policing gained significant information from the field and could coordinate and use this to effectively task patrols. No doubt other agencies received similarly useful field intelligence. There are definite benefits in seeking ways to gain greater information exchange from these sources at one operational command centre. This would enable those in charge to ascertain the location and deployment of all assets involved in the emergency. The issue of having one overarching command centre, while also managing the need to have agencies reporting to their various standard command bases, and ensuring that there is effective communication across all these to the overarching command centre is worth addressing.

Mock exercises of value in preparations

Testing plans and procedures via exercises is useful but potentially more could be done to rehearse responses focusing on community recovery. The benefit of a quick well-trained coordinated response has been recognised by ACT Policing through the development of the SRS team. As mentioned earlier, ACT Policing has identified skills gaps and is undertaking training to address this.

EMA courses are useful and well targeted. However, they tend to target senior officers or specialist practitioners. It would be worthwhile broadening out the training so that a greater number of officers may participate in such courses. Training that increases contact across the services for officers operating in the field is relevant as would increase all services officers' general understanding of other services ranks, roles and responsibilities as well as streamlining cooperation and communication.

Conclusion

In summary, there are issues ACT Policing would like to put forward for further consideration. Key strengths of the response and preparation for it include:

- having plans and sub-plans already developed that outline roles and responsibilities;
- the relative autonomy of Coordinators responsible for implementing their respective sub-plans, which ensured the plans were activated prior to the State of Emergency declaration;
- the bravery and dedication of all emergency services personnel and the community in dealing with the emergency;
- ESB briefings which ensured relevant agencies were placed on stand-by;
- internal procedures and emergency management plans of organisations involved in the emergency response, which ensured that resources were deployed and decisions effectively taken;
- the benefits of using radio and having, for ACT Policing, Communications network, which offers a record and comprehensive management tool for patrols, the POC and forward commanders;
- assistance from volunteers and community good will, which were instrumental in meeting diverse community needs during the emergency;
- a high degree of cooperation and good will among emergency service agencies which ensure effective outcomes;
- agencies having their own media units, which issued timely useful information; and
- the cooperation between private and public media units.

There are a number of areas that, however, require additional consideration and potential improvement. These include:

- the need to develop an additional back-up central command centre, with appropriate space, technical and communication requirements, in case either of the nominated TEOCs locations are rendered un-useable;
- addressing ambiguities and discrepancies in the ACT Emergency Plan, sub-plans and *Act* including:
 - defining the roles and relationships between the TC and AC;
 - specifying how to determine which location (POC or ESB command centre) should be the TEOC in a situation where an AC is appointed;
 - addressing the reversal of roles and duties in a major emergency and impracticalities of relocating operations already established prior to a State of Emergency, which may include consulting, and adopting elements of other state's plans;

- aligning practical examples in some sub-plans to courses of action and responsibilities as defined in the *Act*;
- examining and improving communication infrastructure and relay between the POC and ESB control centre;
- reviewing the operation of SEWS messages including numbering them;
- developing means to resolve differences of opinion on media release content;
- identifying ways to increase resources for media units in major emergencies and overall media coordination;
- using additional information dissemination methods (besides CanberraConnect) to address those areas where phone and electricity services had been damaged;
- undertake public education about where to locate information during an emergency;
- place greater attention on media coordination and issues in training exercises and simulations, especially as media units called on extra staff, who may not be used to working in that environment or agency;
- identify ways to integrate field data from different services;
- addressing command, control and communication issues associated with the need to have one overarching command centre, which needs to effectively interact with the different services pre-existing control bases and their communication networks; and
- addressing current space and technical limitations at the ESB offices which affect its ability to serve as an overall command centre, with consideration given to revisiting the idea of establishing a JESC that includes co-location with ACT Policing resources.

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