

Chief Executive

Mr Ron McLeod AM
Inquiry into the Operational Response
To the January 2003 Bushfires

Dear Mr McLeod

This letter sets out the Chief Minister's Department's submission in relation to your Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires. This submission complements those provided by the Departments with primary responsibility for the operational response (Justice and Community Safety and Urban Services) and the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Secretariat submission that covers a wide range of immediate and longer term response issues.

The Chief Minister's Department submission addresses the following matters:

- a. the implications of the scale and location of the ACT for the management of large scale emergency responses in general and bushfire responses in particular;
- b. the operation of the existing Emergency Management Plan and its strengths and limitations;
- c. the importance of effective public information and related technology;
- d. the roles of individual citizens and community groups in an emergency;
- e. equipment and infrastructure; and
- f. the implications of other current studies on the outcomes of this inquiry.

The Scale and Circumstances of the ACT

The response of the ACT Government, the ACT Public Service and emergency services and the ACT community to the January bushfire disaster demonstrated both the strengths and weaknesses of the ACT's relative small scale and population.

The ACT's public sector is not of a sufficient size to sustain several discrete emergency service agencies as may be the case in larger jurisdictions. Management structures, staffing levels and support costs need to reflect the ACT's funding capacity. There is a need to ensure that the ongoing structure of ACT Emergency Services and related functions is appropriate to the usual needs of the ACT community as well as being able to be scaled up in a structured manner to meet the needs of large scale disasters such as the January bushfires.

The integrated and cooperative emergency services model that has evolved in the ACT has much to commend it including the opportunity for improved coordination and communications with more limited hierarchies and greater personal contacts across organisational boundaries. These relationships served the ACT well during the emergency as ACT Government agencies worked effectively together to meet the needs of the crisis – sometimes through ad-hoc or informal arrangements that were beyond the present structure of the Emergency Management Plan.

There is a need to take these arrangements further through a review of the structure of our emergency services capabilities – defined quite broadly, and through consequential changes to the Emergency Management Plan.

I consider that appropriately managed integrated structures are usually more effective than a wide range of smaller separate organisations, especially where these organisations are expected to combine in the achievement of complex and large scale tasks. An agreed and understood purpose, strong leadership, clear and well resourced command and control arrangements and clearly defined responsibilities are essential. In contrast, organisational and institutional barriers are generally unhelpful.

The adoption of such an approach does not have to be at the expense of the organisational or cultural integrity of particular services. Consistent with the changes that have taken place on a much larger scale in the Australian Defence Force, a distinction can be drawn between the development of capabilities and their direction in operations.

Clear command and management structures are required to raise, train and maintain particular capabilities and the retention of service identity is a valuable aid to motivation and morale. However, that does not mean that such services need to be separately commanded when assigned to operations. This is particularly the case in a large-scale emergency when contributions from a range of emergency services will be required.

Again, having regard to issues of scale and cost, the provision of an integrated command and control system for ACT Emergency Services, supported by appropriate and common technology would seem to be fundamental. Services can then be effectively coordinated during major events or tasked separately for more usual requirements such as the dispatch of an ambulance or an urban fire callout.

In terms of being able to respond most effectively to a bushfire emergency, the opportunity exists to consider further rationalisation beyond ACT Emergency Services. At present a number of agencies within the Department of Urban Services have responsibility for the management of aspects of the non-urban areas of the ACT, including Environment ACT, Act Forests and Canberra Urban Parks and Places. While each of these agencies responded very well to the bushfire emergency, consideration might be given to a more integrated approach to the future management of non-urban areas. I expect that this matter will be addressed by the current study into future land-use options for the non-urban areas of the ACT.

The other issue of scale that I would like to address concerns the need for an emergency management structure that is able to be scaled up during major or prolonged emergencies with designated positions from across the ACT public sector and utilities and perhaps including some Commonwealth agencies (organised through Emergency Management Australia) as well as from New South Wales and regional local governments. Such a structure, that would need to be exercised periodically, would mean that the ACT could better address issues such as the relief of key personnel during prolonged emergencies and the provision of skills such as command and control which were at a premium during the January bushfires.

Such an arrangement would need to be reflected in a full revision of the Emergency Management Plan that is discussed later in this submission.

The location of the ACT within New South Wales is another circumstance that is relevant to the lessons learnt from the January bushfire disaster. From my observations during the event, there was a very good spirit of cooperation between ACT Emergency Services and the NSW Rural Fire Services. These relationships are long standing and reflect the mutual interests of the two jurisdictions. The response of the New South Wales fire services to the ACT on and around 18 January was both extensive and vital. However, there are some aspects that could be improved.

The most important of these relates to communications systems. At present the NSW and ACT fire services use incompatible radio systems which, as I understand it, means that units need to be deployed together to ensure that communications is maintained. I expect that the proposed upgrade to the communications systems of ACT Emergency Services will address this issue.

The NSW Rural Fire Service operates on a shire rather than a regional basis, a structure that is clearly a matter for that jurisdiction. The consequence for the ACT is that we may need to deal with a number of local fire controllers, thus complicating coordination. In the fast moving events of 18 January, a large number of New South Wales air and land resources were deployed to the ACT by NSW fire controllers and were of great assistance. With the benefit of hindsight, more effective communications and liaison between the two jurisdictions may have resulted in an even better use of all available assets. However, I would stress that regard also needs to be had of the overwhelming scale of the events of that day and its impact on otherwise effective command and liaison systems.

Emergency Management Plan

I believe that, overall, the ACT Emergency Management Plan proved to be effective in dealing with the events of January 2003. In particular, the implementation of the Community Recovery and Infrastructure Recovery Sub-Plans under the direction of the Emergency Management Committee chaired by the Chief Police Officer as Territory Controller, was, in my view, an outstanding success. The work of the Children's Youth and Family Services area of the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services, together with the Department of Urban Services and ACT utilities lead by ActewAGL are worthy of particular mention.

There are, however, a number of aspects of the operation of the Emergency Management Plan that need to be reviewed.

The first of these issues is the formal linkage of the emergency response to the Government.

In any large scale emergency, the Chief Minister and the Minister for Emergency Services need to maintain overall strategic direction of the whole-of-government response and to have up to date and comprehensive information, without being involved in the detailed direction of the emergency response. This objective was achieved in the January bushfires, both through Ministerial and Cabinet briefings before the 18th of January, and through essentially ad-hoc but effective arrangements during the emergency.

For example, the Chief Minister and Minister for Emergency Services and their chiefs of staff and relevant Departmental Chief Executives attended the twice daily operational

briefings which were conducted at the ESB headquarters. This approach meant that there was not a need for a separate formal Ministerial briefing that would have unduly consumed the time of the Territory Controller and senior ESB staff. These daily operational briefs were, of course, supplemented by numerous discussions to address specific issues.

While Government liaison is addressed briefly in the Emergency Management Plan, a more structured approach would be beneficial so that clear communications and briefing systems and roles and responsibilities can be put in place.

The second issue is the need for more comprehensive involvement of ACT Government agencies in the development and support of the Emergency Management Plan.

Prior to the January bushfires, the plan was not widely distributed to agencies beyond those areas of departments with specific roles as set out in the plan. This situation did not impact on the key operational responses to the emergency and additional copies of relevant parts of the plan were quickly distributed. However, a version of the plan excluding sensitive matters such as responses to terrorism incidents, should be more widely available within ACT Government agencies in both hard copy and electronic form. There is, perhaps a need to better recognise that the response to a major emergency is the concern of the whole of the Government and the community, rather than being more the preserve of specialist agencies.

A clear deficiency of the current Emergency Management Plan is the coverage of public information. There should be a specific sub-plan on this subject. This matter is dealt with below.

Public Information

The Emergency Management Plan and related structures needs to be amended to provide a more effective framework for the provision of public information during a major emergency.

During the emergency, a number of difficulties were encountered in relation to the provision of public information:

- a. maintaining continuing current operational information required considerably more effort than should have been necessary, essentially due to the natural focus of operational and planning staff on dealing with the fire emergency itself, as well as the limited staff available for those tasks;
- b. the need to ensure that public information was provided consistently to both the media and to the public information channels managed by Canberra Connect again would have benefited from more clearly established processes;
- c. the survivability of the technology supporting public information channels also came under treat, essentially due to the lack of stand alone power supply for the Canberra Connect call centre; and
- d. the impact of the national media attention on the disaster and related debate which ran the risk of distracting attention for the management of the ongoing fire emergency.

All of the above issues were addressed successfully through the rapid establishment of the necessary processes and through the allocation of additional resources.

I consider that the most appropriate responses to these issues would be to provide a much more structured and appropriately resourced capability to provide for public information in an emergency through a separate part of the Emergency Management Plan.

The Role of Citizens and Community Groups

One of the key lessons learnt through this event has been the importance of the contribution of individual citizens and community groups, both in the operational response and the recovery. The strength of this response needs to be built on, both through improved information of bushfire preparations and responses and through the development of enhanced local community responses. For example, simple measures such as knowing neighbours and their contact details, community actions to reduce local bushfire hazards, and possibly, local response capabilities in areas adjacent to the bush might be pursued.

Equipment and Infrastructure

Another major lesson learnt from the bushfire emergency is the need to substantially improve the ACT's emergency response equipment and infrastructure. The issue of radio communications has already been addressed. Of equal importance is the need to have facilities that assist rather than hinder operational responses. The ESB Headquarters at Curtin is simply inadequate. It lacks a functional structure, does not have emergency power, other than for the communications room, lack of a suitable briefing facility and adequate access security.

The separate locations of ESB at Curtin and the ACT Police at the Winchester Centre at Belconnen imposed considerable inefficiencies during the management of the Emergency. The development of a purpose built emergency headquarters close to the Winchester Centre would seem to have considerable operational advantages, as would the effective linkage of communications and computing capabilities.

Other Current Studies

In developing your report, it may be of assistance if you have regard to the terms of reference of the other studies that are being conducted as part of the Bushfire Recovery. In particular the studies into future land-use options for the non-urban areas of the ACT and the Urban Edge study may address some of the issues that fall within your terms of reference.

Yours sincerely

Robert Tonkin
Chief Executive

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