

Submission Number: NND.001.00517

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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation?

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Various aspects of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service response worked very well. The provision of extra resources to our Rural Fire Brigade during the height of the threat to the community was good.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

After some initial issues regarding communications, the local government response was generally good (see below for observations on some aspects).

ELECTRICITY

The response from Endeavor Energy in restoring mains power to the area was generally very good, including providing a large generator to provide power to most of the community while time consuming and extensive replacement works for poles and wires were undertaken.

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

LACK OF PREPAREDNESS OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE (LANDLINES AND MIBILE PHONE RECEPTION) FOR NATURAL DISASTERS INCLUDING BUSH FIRES

The telecommunications infrastructure available to the communities of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine is severely inadequate and underprepared for natural disasters of any kind including bush fires.

The Telstra infrastructure (Telstra Facility) at Mt Wilson comprises a metal shed and caravan, with a microwave transponder (which connects the facility across the Grose Valley to Blackheath) to provide landline connections to the Villages. The Telstra Facility is surrounded closely by dense bush and is extremely vulnerable to bushfire.

Mobile phone reception in the area is very poor with no reliable mobile phone tower servicing the communities in the area or available for emergency services and travellers along stretches of Bells Line Of Rd. A Mobile Black Spot Tower was proposed for the area and announced by the, then, Coalition Government in 2016 as a priority area. Plans for that tower have been abandoned by Telstra with no reasons provided to the community as to why this is no longer a priority area with no alternative proposed to improve mobile phone reception. This severely affected the ability of emergency services to communicate in the field (the topography is such that RFS radio is also of limited use) and to keep the community informed.

Further information in respect of the Brigade's particular experience in the Gosper's Mountain Fire and specific recommendations with wider application in respect of building resilience in telecommunications infrastructure are contained in the supporting material to be included with this Submission.

SLOW REPAIRS TO FIRE DAMAGED TELEPHONE LANDLINES

Some landline infrastructure was destroyed by the bush fire. The poor design of landline pits and cabling contributed to the damage. Telstra repairs took several months to restore landlines to some properties with some services still not operating satisfactorily.

LACK OF PREPAREDNESS OF FIRE FIGHTING INFRASTRUCTURE

In respect of preparing for bushfires in New South Wales, there is insufficient attention paid to preparations such as the maintenance of fire trails before fires occur. While Section 44 of the NSW Rural Fires Act allows such work to be undertaken following specific declarations (S 44 Declarations), often the time available for such essential preparations is too short to undertake the required work. This is particularly the case when a fire is widespread leading to competing demands for limited machinery and human resources to undertake such work.

Further information in respect of the Brigade's particular experience in the Gosper's Mountain Fire and specific recommendations with wider application across jurisdictions are contained in the supporting material to be included with this Submission.

LACK OF CLARITY ON RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CLEARING OF DAMAGED TREES

There is a need for greater clarity on responsibilities between the RFS Incident Control (which was "in charge" of the fire) and local government areas in respect of post fire restoration works such as clearing of dangerous trees along roads. This led to delays in making roads safe. It appeared that lack of clear delegations, including financial delegations, to engage contractors contributed to this. The delays in restoring safe road access was particularly challenging for the local agricultural industry which relies on farm gate sales to survive.

As the costs of such disaster clean-up work falls on the State and (through State and Commonwealth disaster relief programs) the Commonwealth government), inefficient and slow provision of on the ground relief should be of concern to the Commonwealth.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

Better regulation of telecommunications providers to ensure that their physical infrastructure is more resilient and better able to physically withstand a range of natural disasters from bush fires to snow storms and windstorms. This includes more powerful and reliable back up power to maintain availability when mains power is unavailable and better design and maintenance of landline infrastructure.

Further information in respect of the Brigade's particular experience in the Gosper's Mountain Fire and specific recommendations with wider application in respect of building resilience in telecommunications infrastructure are contained in the supporting material to be included with this Submission.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

From our observations, our Brigade's and community's experiences in the Gosper's Mountain Fire are very similar to the experiences in other communities.

There is a strong need for:

- earlier and more integrated preparations for natural disasters of all kinds, not just bush fires, such preparations to cover physical infrastructure (including infrastructure which crosses jurisdictional boundaries), telecommunications and recovery arrangements and processes.
- better working relationships between jurisdictions at local government level; between parts of emergency services organisations and between those services

As our Brigade carries out emergency services work usually undertaken by the State Emergency Services in other parts of NSW (there being no local SES Branch in our area), we see the effects of insufficient preparation and planning for a range of natural disasters and the need for additional support for local emergency services.

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name

Supporting material provided:

Mt Wilson Mt Irvine Rural Fire Brigade Supporting Material for Submission to Royal Commission into Natural Disasters.pdf



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This is supporting material to the Submission made by the Mt Wilson/ Mt Irvine Rural Fire Brigade (Brigade) to the Commonwealth Royal Commission into Natural Disasters

BACKGROUND

1. The Brigade is making this Submission to provide the Royal Commission with a unique perspective on communications, resourcing and interjurisdictional aspects of the preparedness for, and response to, the Gosper's Mountain Fire as it affected Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine (the Villages) and the Brigade's ability to protect and support the Villages community.
2. While our perspective is local, we believe that our perspective has wider application in building preparedness and resilience in natural disasters across jurisdictional boundaries.
3. The villages of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine were affected by the Gosper's Mountain Fire during which event two houses and numerous sheds, machinery, outbuildings, rainforest, gardens and fencing were destroyed in the period between 14th December and mid January 2020.
4. The Brigade's perspective in respect of natural disasters is very extensive because the Brigade carries out many of the functions usually carried out in New South Wales by State Emergency Services (SEWS) branches in other regional areas. There is no local SES branch. As such, our Brigade supports our communities and visitors through a wide range of natural disaster events, such as severe windstorms and snowstorms.
5. Aspects of the Brigade's perspective and observations are highly relevant to the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference because:
 - i. Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine are isolated communities surrounded by the Blue Mountains National Park. The Villages are on the northern edge of both the Blue Mountains City Council local government area (BMCC LGA) and the Blue Mountains District of the Rural Fire Service (Blue Mountains RFSD). The boundary of the Hawkesbury District of the RFS (Hawkesbury RFSD), is within 5 kms of Mt Irvine. In addition, the boundary of Chifley RFSD is 8 kms to the west of Mt Wilson. We have attached a map to illustrate the positioning of the two villages (Attachment A).

- ii. While the Brigade is based and operates within the BMCC LGA and Blue Mountains RFSD, the Gosper's Mountain Fire was managed by the Hawkesbury RFSD. As such, the Gosper's Mountain Fire's Incident Management Team was based at and directed from within the Hawkesbury RFSD at Wilberforce, 68kms by road east from Mt Wilson.
6. Our perspective is therefore driven by our "on the ground" observations of how a natural disaster event which crossed jurisdictional boundaries was managed. While there were many positive experiences during this fire event, including the provision of extensive additional Rural Fire Service resources during the impact of this event on our community, this material focuses on the potential to address the inefficiencies and drags on capability caused by a relative lack of connectivity between jurisdictions, organisations and even within organisations.

THE PREPARATION AND PLANNING FOR NATURAL DISASTERS, INCLUDING BUSHFIRES

A. Preparing fire trails and other preparatory work for bushfires and natural disasters more generally

1. The Brigade's long experience in fighting bushfires indicates that there is insufficient attention paid to preparations such as the maintenance of fire trails before fires occur. While Section 44 of the Rural Fires Act allows such work to be undertaken following specific declarations (S 44 Declarations), often the time available for such essential preparations is too short to undertake the required work. This is particularly the case when a fire is widespread leading to competing demands for limited machinery and human resources to undertake such work.
2. In the case of the Gosper's Mountain fire, a S 44 Declaration was made for the Hawkesbury RFSD in early November 2019 (which covered geographical areas in the Hawkesbury LGA). This allowed Hawkesbury RFSD to undertake a significant amount of preparatory work on fire trails over a period of over a month. As the Villages and our Brigade are situated outside the Hawkesbury RFSD's jurisdiction, the Villages were not automatically included in the Hawkesbury's S44 Declaration.
3. Despite requests, it took until 1 December 2019 for a S44 Declaration to be made in respect of the Villages and surrounding areas. This date was less than two weeks prior to the back burn which "got away" and started to affect the Villages on 14 December 2019, and which continued for some weeks.
4. Given this late S 44 declaration and the widespread demand for the requisite plant and machinery across the area (which meant that they were not readily available) our Brigade had to undertake its fire trail preparations in a very concentrated timeframe, which affected our ability to prepare for the oncoming fire.

5. It is our submission that preparatory work which is funded by the State Government (with some scope for Commonwealth grants and other programs) should not be limited to a period immediately preceding the impact of bush fires or other works to mitigate against natural disasters. We suggest that the State Mitigation Team and local contractors (engaged under appropriate procurement arrangements) be used for this purpose and recommend that the maintenance of fire trails be undertaken each year, based on an audit of fire trail conditions.
6. On how to get best value for money and best results from contractors undertaking these works, our experience in interacting with contractors engaged to undertake works of this kind is that contractors who travel long distances to undertake these works and who do not have a good knowledge of local areas use a significant amount of time in travel (built into their costings) and in familiarising themselves with areas. We suggest that knowledge of local conditions and support for local economies be given increased weightings in these procurement activities.
7. This is relevant for the Commonwealth as suitably crafted procurement rules will have the additional benefit of encouraging local economies and the retention of special skill sets in regional areas.
8. In addition, all natural disaster planning should take into account interconnectivities (both current and potential) between emergency services' infrastructure works in neighbouring jurisdictions. An example of this is in respect of Fire Access and Fire Trail Register (FAFT) work between RFS Districts. The work should be part of regular periodic maintenance undertaken out of fire season. This would allow firefighting resources from within local brigades, to use their time and human and other resources in the period immediately leading up to the impact of a fire on activities which are more appropriate at that time.
9. Compounding the current problems with fire trail maintenance is the fact that many of our fire trails cross the property of various land owners and managers. In the areas in, and surrounding, the Villages the land on which fire trails lie are owned or managed by the Blue Mountains City Council, NPWS, private landowners and the Crown. With each land owner or manager responsible for their own land and no efficient mechanism to undertake fire trail maintenance from end to end regardless of land ownership, the maintenance of fire trails a complicated and time consuming task which is often left undone until a S 44 Declaration is made.
10. It should be noted that the same emergency services infrastructure used to prepare for and fight bush fires is often used in other natural disasters. When wind or snow storms or floods block roads, other physical infrastructure such as fire trails are used by emergency services such as Ambulance Services and Police Rescue to obtain access to cut off communities and to facilitate evacuations of injured or sick persons.

Section A recommendations

A mechanism should be established to allow infrastructure to protect communities in natural disasters, including bush fires, such as fire trails to be maintained “end to end” as needed regardless of land management or ownership.

Infrastructure assessments such as FAFT assessments should include consideration of the end to end value (including potential value) of trails which cross RFS Districts, local government areas and electoral boundaries. Where FAFT and other types of assessments have already been concluded, they should be reopened.

A holistic view should be taken of the versatility and potential of emergency services infrastructure, regardless of original purpose or ownership.

B. Preparing essential infrastructure for bushfires (Telstra)

1. Ensuring the preparedness and resilience of telecommunications infrastructure is an essential component of the Commonwealth’s role as regulator.
2. The Telstra infrastructure (Telstra Facility) at Mt Wilson comprises a metal shed and caravan, with a microwave transponder (which connects the facility across the Grose Valley to Blackheath) to provide landline connections to the Villages. The Telstra Facility is surrounded closely by dense bush and is extremely vulnerable to bushfire.
3. As the Telstra Facility is in a longstanding state of external neglect, the Brigade expended scarce resources in the days before the fire impacted Mt Wilson in clearing a narrow path between the road and the Telstra Facility. The significance of telecommunications to both our communities and the Brigade’s operations is very high as our fireground radios being very unreliable in our mountainous topography.
4. Like many Rural Fire Brigades, we have few people available to prepare for fire as it approaches. So, to have to expend some of these limited resources to provide even minor preparations to protect the Telstra Facility from the approaching fire is particularly frustrating.
5. Our concerns about the vulnerabilities of the Telstra Facility, were realised on the evening of 19 December 2019 when it was endangered by a flareup of the Gosper’s Mountain Fire.
6. Through the effective lack of an Asset Protection Zone (APZ) around the Telstra Facility, the fire came within 10 metres of it. It took two RFS fire trucks and four Fire and Rescue trucks to defend the Telstra Facility over a long and tense night, during which Brigade firefighters, some of whom had already done a twelve-hour day shift, had to be deployed to assist. The mopping up to ensure no flareup took another day and another Fire and Rescue Unit several

hours to undertake. Adjacent residents, all members of our Brigade, also undertook regular patrols of the Telstra Facility and surrounding bush in the following week to ensure that any flareups (of which there were several) were dealt with promptly. Had an effective APZ been in place, the required action to extinguish the fire as it approached the Telstra Facility would have been modest.

7. While it is the role of the Brigade and other fire fighting resources to defend assets such the Telstra Facility, it is not the Brigade's or any other fire fighting agency's job to prepare their assets for them.

Section B recommendation

Telstra should maintain an APZ of at least 10 metres around its Telstra Facility, and undertake regular and thorough clearing of the APZ (including removal of the material) to prevent a build up of hazardous materials in the APZ

C. Preparing road access for use in bushfires

There is currently only one useable road in and out of Mount Wilson and Mount Irvine. This is Mount Wilson Road, a two lane sealed road which runs from the Bells Line of Road, along a very exposed ridge line and through dense bush with large trees growing right up to the road to Mount Wilson, a distance of approximately 8 kms. There is then approximately 10 kms of sealed winding road between Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine along Mt Irvine Rd which is similarly hemmed in by large trees.

Section C recommendation

In respect of both Mt Wilson Rd and Mt Irvine Rd, BMCC should be funded to undertake clearance of the verges of the road from Bells Line of Rd through to Mt Irvine to allow greater visibility and additional clear space from which to undertake firefighting activities and to improve visibility for emergency services vehicles and other traffic using the roads. The extent of clearance should be such that, in the event of trees falling over the road, there is only a small amount of material for the Brigade or other emergency services to clear away to regain vehicular access.

D. Expanding emergency services access for use in bushfires and other natural disasters

1. In addition, the single road in and out of the Villages is extremely vulnerable to any event (bushfire, snowstorm or windstorm) which can block it. Having this sole access road is a relatively recent situation. Until approximately 2010, the Brigade, neighbouring RF Brigades (including Hawkesbury Brigades) and the community could access Bells Line of Road at Bilpin via Bowens Creek Road from Mt Irvine, via a road. which ran from Bilpin to Mt Irvine via a bridge over Bowens Creek. Bowens Creek marks the jurisdictional boundaries between BMCC LGA and Hawkesbury City Council LGA. The creek also marks the

boundary between BMCC RFSD and Hawkesbury RFSD. The route is therefore owned in part by each of the two LGAs and, until 2010, was actively used by RF Brigades from both BMCC RFSD and Hawkesbury RFSD.

2. For BMCC LGA, Mt Irvine is the “end of the line”, as there are no properties beyond that village. On the Hawkesbury side, there are a few properties along Mt Irvine Rd at Bilpin but the last property is on top of the plateau prior to the drop into Bowens Creek.
3. The Bowens Creek Rd/Mt Irvine Rd on the Hawkesbury side, which is still a public road, has been closed due to its very poor condition and several road slippages since approximately 2010. Our Brigade, formally supported by NSW Ambulance Service, has been advocating for ten years for this route to be restored to fire trail standards to allow emergency service vehicles to use it. We believe, based on our long associations with NSW Police Rescue (with whom we have worked on numerous rescues of bushwalkers and canyoneers in this area), that it would also be supportive of the restoration of this route for their work.
4. The area around the Bowens Creek Road route is at a lower altitude and it experiences, in general, milder weather conditions than those experienced along Mt Wilson Rd and Mt Irvine Rd. As such, when Mt Wilson Rd and Mt Irvine Rd have been closed due to natural disasters such as a windstorm in July 2011 and a snowstorm in October 2014, the weather conditions along Bowens Creek Rd would still have provided access to the Villages. In both the windstorm and snowstorm there were serious medical emergencies with limited access to outside assistance. In these types of events, air assistance is usually unavailable, due to the adverse weather.
5. We have made numerous representations and submissions to both BMCC LGA and Hawkesbury LGA to restore Bowens Creek Road. While BMCC LGA has maintained the route down to Bowens Creek, HCC has not undertaken any work on the route for many years. While a feasibility study has been undertaken on restoring the route for emergency vehicles access (of the study having been undertaken due to Commonwealth funding), no progress has been made on the restoration project for well over a year.
6. We are uncertain as to whether the RFS has completed its FAFT processes in the Hawkesbury LGA. Whether this work has been completed or not, it should be linked with the work undertaken in BMCC RFSD (which has been concluded on the basis that this route “goes nowhere” and has therefore been given a low rating) to make a proper assessment of the strategic value to the RFS in having this route between the two RFS Districts restored. When this work is joined up and consideration is taken of the value of the route if restored to allow emergency services vehicles to use it, it is our strong belief that it would be given a high priority under the FAFT system and be eligible for restoration and ongoing maintenance resources.
7. As Hawkesbury had not maintained the road on the Bilpin side beyond the last private property, when it became evident during planning that backburning off Bowens Creek Rd/ Mt Irvine Rd was a viable option as part of the Gosper’s Mountain Fire containment strategy there was a significant time

delay (at least two days) in getting the top section of the road on the Hawkesbury side accessible for fire trucks to undertake backburning. As circumstances unfolded (fire reaching the area earlier than anticipated), backburning plans changed and the fire fighting in that area focused on containment and extinguishment work rather than defensive activities.

8. In all our work in this area, we are very mindful of the lessons learnt from the Kinglake fire in Victoria on Black Saturday. As recommended in the Victorian Inquiry into that fire, communities which have only one road for ingress and egress are at great risk in the event of natural disaster or fire. The geographical situation of the Villages is very similar to that of Kinglake.

Section D recommendation

The Commonwealth should provide assistance to the State government (via regional infrastructure programs) to enable the two LGAs to have the route restored to allow emergency services vehicles to travel between Mt Irvine and Bells Line of Rd at Bilpin.

E. Maintenance of telecommunications infrastructure during natural disaster events, including bush fires (Telstra)

1. A further dimension to the lack of resilience in Telstra's infrastructure is evidenced whenever mains electricity is cut to Mt Wilson and therefore, the Telstra Facility.
2. During the Gosper's Mountain Fire, the Villages were cut off from mains electricity (commencing on 14 December 2019) for between 11 days and 30 days (depending on each user's location). During the period between 15 December and 18 December the Telstra Facility was shut down and thus no landlines were usable. In an area with poor to no mobile phone reception such as ours, the loss of landlines in any emergency situation is of grave concern and seriously impacts our ability to protect our communities.
3. The Telstra Facility failed on 15 December because the Telstra on-site back up battery has a life of only around eight hours. While Telstra did install a portable generator on 18 December, the generator was dependent on Telstra contractors refuelling the diesel fuel tank every two days. However, as the portable generator powers the infrastructure via a standard power cord (easily disturbed by animals, adverse weather or falling trees), the generator power failed on several occasions before mains power was restored. On one occasion the fuel ran out because a contractor had not refuelled it. The Brigade only discovered this on conducting an inspection of the Telstra Facility. On that occasion, the Brigade refuelled the generator but due to the poor connection arrangements, the generator still did not power the Telstra Facility.

Section E recommendations

Telstra should install more robust back up power arrangements for use when mains power is disturbed or when the roads are closed/cut due to fire activity, windstorms, snowstorms and other prolonged emergency incidents.

Another aspect of lack of resilience in Telstra's provision of landlines is that their design, construction and maintenance makes them vulnerable in the event of bush fires. Telstra should use better, more robust cable pit design and maintenance to prevent the build up of flammable material in and around pits would assist to reduce fire damage and therefore the lengthy and expensive repairs needed to restore landlines.

F. Telecommunications Systems

1. Communications technologies to assist both the RFS and communities in times of emergency and the availability of mobile phones is widely regarded as a basic communication tool. Due to local topography and the lack of available mobile phone towers, the Villages have very limited mobile phone reception. We are largely in a mobile phone black spot area. We estimate that only about 20% of the area the Brigade works in has reasonable mobile phone coverage.
2. Those same topographical challenges make our RFS fire ground radios of limited, and in some places of no, use. The combination of the unavailability of both these forms of communications is of grave concern to our Brigade.
3. In 2016 Mt Tomah (an adjacent mountain) was identified under the Mobile Phone Black Spot Tower program for a new mobile phone tower to service surrounding areas, including the Villages and traffic along Bells Line of Road. Despite the area having been so identified as being grossly inadequately served by mobile phones, the preliminary work for the tower was abandoned by Telstra within the last year. No alternate solution is currently planned and no explanation has been provided to the community as to why an area previously assessed as needing this piece of essential telecommunications infrastructure is now no longer considered appropriate for this Commonwealth funded program.
4. As all phone companies increasingly focus on their mobile phone systems and less on landline phones, mobile coverage becomes critical. Many of the services the Brigade and the community depends on are delivered via mobile systems. This includes critical communication between teams in the field and between fire management and brigades on sensitive and important issues. It also includes systems which volunteers and their families depend on.
5. In the Brigade's Submission to the NSW Inquiry we have requested a range of practical improvements to enhance our emergency services response capability. These are:

- i. that a Fireground radio repeater be installed to boost capability. Following the 2013 Coronial Inquiry into the State Mine Fire (which also severely impacted on our area), the RFS advised that a repeater would be located in the area to boost fireground radio effectiveness. This has not been installed to date and we have no information on when it will be so installed. The Brigade believes this should be a matter of high priority;
- ii. that the Infrared aerial line scans which are provided as part of the Common Operating Picture (COP) be enhanced to address some of the following limitations:
 - a. have limited utility in that they only show areas of high intensity fire, not lower intensity fire activity (which is important to know about to extinguish early);
 - b. have reduced clarity and usefulness when undertaken in smoky and/or cloudy conditions and because they are produced through aerial (fixed wing) fly overs, they cannot be undertaken in adverse flying conditions, such as high smoke levels or high winds;
 - c. being produced through aerial (fixed wing) fly overs which are scarce resources, the deployment of those resources are dictated by state priorities. As such, there are times when line scans are not available;
 - d. that the Fires Near Me app be enhanced to be not out of date and refreshed frequently enough and to show the direction of fire movement;
 - e. that Common Operating Picture (COP) information be enhanced so that it can be updated even though the line scans or helicopter mapping may not be available due to adverse conditions such as smoke, wind or cloud cover, and
 - f. that access to GRN radio channels be improved through the provision of dedicated channels for use in particular areas; and
- iii. that the RFS develop a mobile phone app to allow users to download maps for offline use which would also allow users to plot locations and trails, measure distances. We note that the RFS have been working on an app for this purpose for some time. In a fire fighting context, this would allow local brigades to “walk the edge” of fire activity, plot it on maps and use locally. Importantly, brigades working on the ground could provide this information to IMTs to assist in their planning of future fire fighting activities and deployments. The Brigade notes there are a number of existing software applications, such as Avenza, which could be procured which would assist in rolling out this capability sooner. We understand that this is used by NPWS to great effect in various activities, including in their fire fighting work.

Section F recommendation

While these are matters are for the NSW Inquiry to consider, improvements to the RFS' capabilities in these areas, supported by Commonwealth funding programs and consistently with the Commonwealth's role in telecommunications, would make a significant contribution to building community and emergency services resilience against natural disasters.

CONCLUSION

1. From its very long and extensive experience in fighting fires and in supporting our communities through natural disasters more generally, the Brigade strongly believes that the adoption of the various suggestions we have made will enhance the ability of our Brigade to protect our community and to be a more effective part of the nation's natural disaster response capability and capacity.
2. Moreover, we believe that the adoption across emergency services of the more generic suggestions we have made would enhance the ability of local emergency services to similarly improve their abilities to serve and protect their communities.