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Submission Of: John Kent

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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?

Explained in attachment.

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

Explained in attachment

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

Explained in attachment

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

Explained in attachment

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

Supporting material provided:

John Kent - Submission.pdf

Emergency Response: Suggestions for Consideration

John Kent. [REDACTED]

Introduction

Australia is regularly affected by disasters and emergencies of one form or another: bushfires; storms; cyclones; floods; drought; major transport accidents; ocean rescues; land search and rescues; surf rescues etc. Earthquakes and avalanches occur infrequently.

Scientists inform us that we will face an accelerating trend towards more extreme climatic conditions which will result in more frequent natural disasters. Our rapidly expanding population is seeing more and more people put at risk.

Disasters result in major disruption to individuals, communities and businesses. Many people may need evacuation and financial, physical and emotional support immediately and in the medium and longer terms. Following a disaster there is the immediate emergency **response**, followed by the **stabilisation** of the situation and commencement of the **relief** effort, then the long term **recovery** process for individuals, businesses and communities. The clean up and recovery effort required after the initial emergency response and relief may continue for years.

To respond to these emergencies, we are blessed with:

1. Professional emergency service workers including Fire and Rescue, Police, and Ambulance.
2. Outstanding volunteer emergency response organisations like RFS/CFA, SES, VRA, Marine Rescue and Surf Lifesavers among others.
3. Community groups including BlazeAid, CWA, Red Cross, churches including Salvation Army, Vinnies, and various community recreation clubs and associations.
4. A dedicated and caring general public who readily volunteer their time, expertise, finances etc to assist those impacted by disasters.

All volunteers in emergency response organisations sacrifice their own livelihoods while they put their lives on hold to deal with emergencies, not to mention the time they spend in training for emergencies. Frequently they put their lives in danger. They deserve our heartfelt gratitude!

Recent issues

The 2019/20 summer bushfire emergencies have highlighted a number of issues which I have observed first hand (while volunteering at a community bushfire relief centre and with BlazeAid) and have been informed of by people who have been involved:

1. There has been a significant disconnect and lack of communication between “official” channels (local, state and federal governments and emergency services etc). It has been said many times that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.
2. There has been a major problem with coordinating emergency responses, in particular, the communication, organization and logistics of the massive community volunteer relief effort and donations. For example:

- a. Community members and groups have become frustrated at the bureaucracy and lack of communication/coordination and have established their own *ad hoc* support services for those impacted (e.g. evacuees and those who have lost homes). In Wagga Wagga, there was a major problem when community members tried to donate goods and assistance to evacuees at the official evacuation centre only to be turned away. City Council was no help! Community members took it upon themselves to establish a makeshift support centre at a local school. I have been told of a church group who made sandwiches and cakes etc for evacuees but when they went to the official evacuation centre they were turned away because the food was not prepared in an “accredited kitchen”!! They then tried to take the food to the firies on the front line only to be turned away again!!
 - b. People who have significant contributions to make have been unable to find contact phone numbers of people coordinating relief efforts. For example, a group of students in Sydney hired a truck to bring donated goods to the community relief centre in Wagga (a 5 hour trip) because they could not find any contact details of evacuation centres closer to Sydney.
 - c. A lot of communication has occurred through community Facebook pages that people have set up. There are no official Facebook pages that I know of! The ABC Radio has done a fantastic job. The “Fires Near Me” APP is terrific as is the “Live Traffic” APP. However, I am unaware of any APP or standard way to coordinate a community response to an emergency.
3. Time and again, evacuees have been desperate for information about their communities and homes. A number of evacuees I spoke with at Wagga Wagga said that after a week they still did not know if they had a home to return to or what was happening!! This lack of information was adding enormously to their stress levels. This situation could be because emergency services had not been able to get to properties, or communication channels were broken or did not exist. The ABC radio has been an excellent service trying to provide up to date information although information is usually too general. A problem is that many people do not listen to the ABC. Unless they do, they would not know that it was “Your emergency broadcaster”. It needs to be promoted as such throughout the community.
 4. I have been told that some interstate volunteer firefighters have not been allowed to work in NSW because they are not “NSW Accredited”. Victorian fire trucks cannot communicate with NSW fire trucks because the radios are incompatible!! Firies have been forced to communicate using their personal mobile phones. Some are having difficulty in gaining reimbursement for these expenses – they have to prove the calls were for emergency communication.
 5. There has been much comment about the lack of resources for volunteer groups. For example, firies have been forced to buy their own respirators and equipment. Why is it that emergency volunteer groups have to run fundraising activities like sausage sizzles in order to operate!?
 6. I have heard that firies on the front line have not been receiving the support they need e.g. care packages, and when emergency supplies do reach their communities there is none left when the firies knock off for the day.
 7. Many evacuees have been desperate to get home to provide feed and water to animals. Being denied access for many days is very distressing for them. I have been told that in many cases they can’t travel on roads because an arborist is required to direct tree clearing!! In some cases they have been escorted in by a fire truck which is completely sensible.

8. There is debate over the merits of providing a payment to volunteer fire fighters who have carried the load in the ongoing fire emergencies. Many have spent considerable time away from their businesses or employment.
9. Many members of the part-time emergency services, while extremely knowledgeable, have limited physical capacity because of their age. More young fit members are needed.
10. The deployment of the Army Reserve and Navy has been welcomed.

Can we do things differently?

I am told that since the 1939 bushfire disasters, there have been 109 reviews of emergency responses and that most of the recommendations have never been implemented!! These must be revisited because we can learn so much from past mistakes. We need government leadership for the betterment of our society and not just for political gain!

The following are suggested for consideration during the review of the current emergency response:

Recommendation 1: Enhance communication and coordination of emergency responses and community response efforts.

A number of communication channels are needed to cater for community needs. A combination of the following should reach all relevant community members and also assist emergency services in getting their messages out clearly and efficiently to the community:

- a. Develop a national Emergency Information APP (or expand the *Fires Near Me* APP?) to cover all emergencies and to include information on evacuation centres, community donations and support, contact details of an emergency information contact centre etc. I am told the VIC Fires APP provides more information than the NSW one. Contributors to this could be SES, VRA, RFS, Police, Government etc. An APP can broadcast alerts and is readily accessible for people at a time and place to suit them because most now carry a smartphone even if they do not have a computer or internet access. Such an APP needs to be **national** because many disasters occur across state borders and duplication of effort will be avoided.
- b. Establish and promote a standard Emergency Information Facebook page (social media is now a very effective means of communication although not all people use it). This could work in parallel with the smartphone APP.
- c. Promote the ABC radio as the official Emergency Information Broadcaster. Presenters may need training in delivering emergency information and their lack of local knowledge (eg place name pronunciation) can sometimes be an issue. While an excellent service, during an emergency people are not listening to the radio – they are too busy.

Benefits:

Well promoted and understood communication channels will:

- Enhance community knowledge and coordination of effort.
- Reduce stress on those caught up in emergencies.
- Reduce duplication and streamline information delivery by emergency services.

Recommendation 2: Support the highly effective part-time semi-professional community volunteer emergency service organisations through proper funding for equipment and training.

Benefits:

- Enhances the effectiveness of service providers through better equipment and training.
- Eliminates the need for service provider members to spend precious time fund raising.

Recommendation 3: Enhance emergency response coordination at federal, state and local levels.

This could be achieved through the establishment of an overarching national **Civil Emergency Response Agency** as an evolution of the newly established **National Bushfire Recovery Agency**.

This Agency should be responsible for:

- Coordinating all emergency preparation, response and recovery (bushfires, floods, cyclones etc).
- Coordinating the efforts of all government (federal, state and local) and relevant organisations (RFS/CFA, SES, VRA, St Johns Ambulance, Red Cross, BlazeAid etc etc). The alliance could be structured so that each group retains its own identity if desired.
- Coordinating the distribution of disaster relief funds (government and donations) both directly to those affected and through registered community organisations such as BlazeAid, CWA, Salvation Army etc.
- Coordinating community volunteers and donations.

This organization would ideally be structured regionally on an electorate (federal or state) or local government shire basis. Each region could:

- a. Have a designated emergency response Coordinator. Responsibilities could include:
 - Work with local emergency services to coordinate all professional, semi-professional, and community response efforts.
 - Be the focal point for contact and communication.
 - Facilitate communication channels linking federal, state and local governments, community organisations and individual volunteers.
 - Oversee evacuation centres.
 - Coordinate community volunteer support in an emergency to streamline efforts and avoid confusion.
- b. Have designated evacuation centres in each region where support services are brought together and resources are available/ stored in a depot. The evacuation centres/depots could also serve as regional training centres and provide short term evacuation accommodation.

Benefits

- Efficient coordination of all response and relief efforts.
- Streamlines government responses.
- Enhances community coordination, understanding and responses.
- Regular training workshops for community volunteers will ensure a core of knowledgeable people.

Recommendation 4: Pay members of the part-time semi-professional emergency response organisations (SES, RFS, VRA, Marine Rescue etc) in the same way, and same rate, that Army Reservists are paid.

Personnel would be paid to attend regular training as well as call-outs to emergencies and provision of relief and recovery services.

- Full time professionals should be engaged to provide the leadership, coordination and training.
- The full time professionals could also be tasked with coordinating volunteer community groups and individuals, liaison with professionals, coordination with local government and relevant government departments, state government, media etc as part of the Civil Emergency Response Agency (Recommendation 3).

Benefits:

- Provides a financial reward for member involvement.
- Helps alleviate loss of income during emergency responses.
- Provides an incentive for community members to join emergency response organisations thereby growing capacity and emergency response effort.

Recommendation 5: Consider bringing all the part-time semi-professional emergency response organisations (SES, RFS, VRA, Marine Rescue etc) into a single Civil Emergency Response Agency to cover all emergencies (bushfire, flood, storm/cyclone, major accident etc).

This takes Recommendation 3 to the next level.

- Members would receive payment as per Recommendation 4.
- Members would receive appropriate training e.g. fire fighting, 4WD vehicle, chainsaw, first aid, communications, logistics, mental health first aid, map reading and navigation, small boat handling, vehicle maintenance, search and rescue, logistics, catering etc etc.
- A full time core may be needed for coordination and training provision. This would provide an excellent career pathway.

Benefits:

- Extra incentives for individuals to contribute to their communities.
- An increase in the number of community members with highly desirable skills and positive community outlook.
- Streamlined part-time emergency services into a single organization should reduce administrative and logistical overheads through consolidating equipment, premises, communications, frontline operations, logistical support, and administration, as well as speeding up response times.
- Excellent career pathways for suitable candidates.

Recommendation 6: Consider introducing a mandatory “national service” requirement for all men and women (e.g. 18 – 20 year olds) according to their abilities.

To fit in with work or study obligations, the requirement could be for part time (“x” number of days/weeks per year) service to defence force reserves, Civil Emergency Response Agency, emergency response organisations, emergency recovery operations, environmental management,

surf life saving, marine rescue etc. Roles could be front line, administration, or support activities (eg catering, communications). Payment would be as per Recommendation 4.

On completion of the compulsory service, there should be the option of continuing on as a paid part time (or full time) member.

The flow-on benefits for our community be incalculable.

Benefits

- Individual involvement and the multitude of skills gained would have a major positive impact on participant self esteem and self discipline.
- An income stream for struggling students and unemployed/underemployed people.
- Communities would benefit though the enhanced skills, attitude and contribution of participants plus the small increase in income received.
- The benefits for indigenous and remote communities where employment opportunities are limited would be enormous.
- There will be an enormous increase in the number of young fit members who can learn from the highly experienced older brigade.

Funding Options

Implementation of these recommendations will come down to political will, self interest and funding. The following funding options should be considered:

- A levy on all citizens e.g. Medicare levy.
- Through consolidated revenue via a small increase in personal/company income tax.
- Through a levy on insurance companies who are major beneficiaries of services provided.

Note:

- In the event of a disaster, Community financial contributions should go directly to emergency relief and not into consolidated revenue or overheads.
- Interest earned by an emergency relief fund should be channeled back into that fund and not into consolidated revenue.
- Administration overheads MUST be kept to a minimum. It is pleasing that some community emergency relief funds incur NO administrative overheads.
- There needs to be greater scrutiny and control over “pop up” donated emergency relief funds to avoid scams and fraud.
