



Surf Life Saving Australia

Submission to

**Senate Standing Committees on Environment
and Communications**

on

**Recent trends in and preparedness for extreme
weather events**

Submission Prepared by

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Submission to Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications Inquiry into “Recent trends in and preparedness for extreme weather events”

Introduction

Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) appreciates the opportunity to provide information to the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications Inquiry into “Recent trends in and preparedness for extreme weather events”.

This submission gives particular regard to human safety in the coastal context and the impacts on the ability of Surf Life Saving to provide its traditional safety services.

Over 85% of Australians live near the vast coastline of Australia that covers more than 35,877kms and when including all islands this increases to 59,736kms. The coastal beaches while a magnet for living and visiting also have inherent and largely unpredictable risk.

In the past 106 years Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) has saved over 550,000 lives at Australia’s beaches and continues to rescue more than 11,000 people every year. Tragically, each year more than 90 lives are lost and many hundreds of people suffer injuries – from minor incidents to serious trauma in accidents relating to our coast.

Of the 11,748 beaches now identified by the Australian Beach Safety and Management Program (ABSAMP), only approximately 3% (400) have a lifesaving service.

The lifesaving services provided by SLSA and local government authorities along the Australian coastline are well known the world over. They contribute to the recreational experience of beach goers, whether from the local communities, across Australia or overseas.

These lifesaving services will need to continue into the future irrespective of the impacts of climate change. The duration and seasonality of the services may need to be modified as may the locations at which they are provided due to changing population trends.

SLSA’s services are at the frontline when considering the impact of extreme weather events.

Surf Life Saving Australia presents the following recommendations against each of the matters, where relevant, for the Committee’s consideration:

SLSA Response

(a) recent trends on the frequency of extreme weather events, including but not limited to drought, bushfires, heatwaves, floods and storm surges;

SLSA COMMENT: Nil comment

(b) based on global warming scenarios outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation of 1 to 5 degrees by 2070:

(i) projections on the frequency of extreme weather events, including but not limited to drought, bushfires, heatwaves, floods and storm surges,

SLSA COMMENT: Nil comment

(ii) the costs of extreme weather events and impacts on natural ecosystems, social and economic infrastructure and human health, and

SLSA COMMENT:

Extreme weather events do impact the coast and the beaches where people recreate for health and social reasons. The impacts invariably alter the coastline in a number of ways.

Emergency response procedures (e.g. post event risk assessments) and appropriate interventions need to be supported, as do volunteer community groups that provide regular safety services and those that respond to emergencies.

For example erosion resulting from extreme weather events often impacts access to and from the beaches and water for recreation. Quite frequently the impacts create scarping, which in some severe cases inhibits a safe access to the beach and water for pedestrians and also surf lifesaver rescue vehicles and craft.

Local Governments in conjunction with emergency services such as SLSA need to act quickly with warning signage and also isolation “fencing” (either rigid or flexible) to protect people from hazards. Further, there is an opportunity to create temporary safer beach access through the scarping as soon as possible after an extreme weather event.

(iii) the availability and affordability of private insurance, impacts on availability and affordability under different global warming scenarios, and regional social and economic impacts;

SLSA COMMENT:

Damage to lifesaving facilities and infrastructure due to erosion is unable to be insured therefore community emergency service groups are exposed financially and also socially as a result of the impacts of climate change.

The government needs to consider an emergency response funding mechanism to which surf life saving clubs and services have access in times of emergencies to enable them to resume normal safety operations as soon as possible following an extreme weather event.



Fig 1. Seaspray Surf Life Saving Club, Victoria; June 2007 (courtesy Life Saving Victoria)

(c) an assessment of the preparedness of key sectors for extreme weather events, including major infrastructure (electricity, water, transport, telecommunications), health, construction and property, and agriculture and forestry;

SLSA COMMENT: Nil comment

(d) an assessment of the preparedness and the adequacy of resources in the emergency services sector to prevent and respond to extreme weather events;

SLSA COMMENT:

Firstly, the use of the word “prevent” in this context is at question. Other words such as “prepare for” may be more applicable.

Secondly, there is generally an inadequacy of resources in the community volunteer emergency services sector to prepare for and respond to extreme weather events. Some services are expanding their capacity as funding becomes available. There is an opportunity to expand this capacity through an appropriate funding mechanism.

(e) the current roles and effectiveness of the division of responsibilities between different levels of government (federal, state and local) to manage extreme weather events;

SLSA COMMENT:

The Council of Australian Governments should recognise the extensive SLSA network across Australia and across jurisdictions and take appropriate steps, both organisationally and fiscally, to further integrate the SLSA network into emergency services preparedness, planning, and response systems and activities.

(f) progress in developing effective national coordination of climate change response and risk management, including legislative and regulatory reform, standards and codes, taxation arrangements and economic instruments;

SLSA COMMENT:

The Government while cognisant of the work of Australia’s surf lifesavers should further recognise the extensive network of SLSA surf clubs, lifeguards and operations support services and the role it could further play in not only providing safety services, but in a structured approach to monitoring visually and physically the changing conditions of Australia’s beaches and coastline as a result of extreme weather events.

SLSA recommends the provision of a funding mechanism, initial and ongoing, to provide regularly updated data on and visual surveillance of each of Australia’s 500 most attended beaches, including those with a lifesaving service. This will not only enhance safety provision but will provide a visual history of changing coastal conditions.

(g) any gaps in Australia's Climate Change Adaptation Framework and the steps required for effective national coordination of climate change response and risk management; and

SLSA COMMENT: Volunteer community emergency services such as SLSA should continue to be engaged and included in emergency services preparedness, planning, and response systems and activities at all levels of government.

(h) any related matter.

SLSA COMMENT: Nil comment

END