



Australian Government

Defence

Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

Department of Defence Submission

January 2023

Executive Summary

Defence welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to support the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience. This submission addresses the terms of reference, specifically the line of inquiry into 'current preparedness, response and recovery workforce models'.

Defence's mission and purpose is to *defend Australia and its national interests in order to advance Australia's security and prosperity*; this is achieved through *the conduct of operations, and provision of support for the Australian community and civilian authorities, in accordance with Government direction*.¹ This submission states that the increased scope, scale and duration of Australian Defence Force (ADF) commitment to domestic disaster relief has resulted in workforce pressure on both permanent and reserve ADF capacity, which may incur reduced capability within some areas. Increased utilisation of ADF resources during domestic natural disasters has required Defence to reprioritise its workforce to meet Government direction, reducing capacity and opportunity to train, maintain and sustain its workforce to meet the operational requirements of its primary mission.

The role of the ADF in responding to natural disasters

Defence policy and direction for Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC) during disaster events is contained in the *Defence Assistance to the Civil Community Policy* and the *Defence Assistance to the Civil Community Manual*. These documents define the process, roles, and responsibilities for a Defence response to domestic disasters. DACC is divided into two classes of assistance, emergency and non-emergency. Emergency assistance has three categories:

- Category 1 – local emergency assistance (DACC 1);
- Category 2 – significant crisis response or relief assistance (DACC 2); and
- Category 3 – significant recovery assistance (DACC 3).

The ADF does not initiate DACC assistance, it is conducted in response to requests from federal, state, or civil agencies. Whole-of-government arrangements are outlined in the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework (AGCMF) and the Australian Government Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN), led by the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA).

Defence is tasked to be prepared to provide domestic disaster relief through the Chief of the Defence Force Preparedness Directive (CPD). The CPD provides direction from Chief of the Defence Force to the ADF and expectations of the wider Department of Defence on the preparedness requirements necessary to defend Australia and its national interests, and provides support to the Australian community and civilian authorities, in accordance with Government direction. Defence maintains specific force generation² requirements for each directed task. In the event of domestic natural disasters, Defence provides an appropriate level of response in both emergency and non-emergency situations based on Australian Government direction within DACC arrangements. Although states and territories have primary responsibility for domestic disaster responses within their jurisdiction, the provision of Defence support to civilian agencies when requested in times of major disasters and emergencies has been a consistent policy of Australian Government assistance.³ This assistance delivers an outcome or effect at a time when the recipient's own resources are unlikely to be sufficient or have been overwhelmed.

¹ [Defence mission | About | Defence](#)

² The process of providing suitably trained and equipped forces, and their means of deployment, recovery and sustainment to meet all current and potential future tasks, within required readiness and preparation times. (Australian Defence Glossary)

³ Defence Assistance to the Civil Community Policy (Edition 2)

The provision of DACC is based on a number of factors and deliberate consideration is required to ensure Defence resources continue to be used to deliver the core business of Defence. Defence maintains the capacity to provide scaled domestic disaster relief responses over a defined duration.

The impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters, due to climate change, on the ongoing capacity and capability of the Australian Defence Force

Defence is resourced to meet existing Government direction to conduct domestic disaster relief within its mission and purpose. The employment of ADF resources to conduct domestic disaster relief is increasingly in tension with the requirement to resource operations and activities to defend Australia and its national interests. The use of both full-time and part-time Defence personnel to support the Australian community since 2019 has been at an unprecedented scale, duration and frequency. This period has included support to the 2019 Bushfires (over 7,000 deployed), COVID-19 assistance (19,000 personnel for 26,000 deployments), assistance to the 2022 floods (over 9,000 deployed over three operations), and the recent 2023 floods (over 100 deployed as of 27 January 2023). In January 2020 the Governor General ordered the call out of over 2500 reservists⁴ for the first time in history to support the bushfire operations. Since 2019 over 35,100 ADF personnel have deployed in domestic disaster relief operations, some multiple times. As at 30 November 2022, the ADF permanent workforce guidance is for a strength of approximately 62,000 with the actual strength less than this amount.⁵ While the ADF is proactively postured to support the response to domestic disaster relief, the unprecedented scale, duration and frequency of support is unsustainable without accepting significant impacts to ADF preparedness for its primary defence of Australia role.

The enduring requirement for Defence in responding to more frequent and intense domestic natural disasters impacts its capacity to conduct specific training, exercises or deployments. For example, the new Supply Class Auxiliary Oiler Replenishment (AOR) ship HMAS *Stalwart* was withdrawn from Regional Presence Deployment 22-2 to allow provision of personnel to support flood assistance operations. The re-deployment of *Stalwart's* personnel to community assistance delayed *Stalwart's* training and also delayed the Supply Class AOR introduction into Navy service. While in this instance this delay did not limit options to execute Government direction, or preparation for other CPD tasks, future incidents in a complex and evolving strategic environment may not be without consequence. The opportunity cost on training, exercises or deployments has a resultant impact on capability to effectively respond to defence of Australia contingencies.

Defence Reserves have not created significant additional capacity in supporting domestic disaster relief operations. While Army's 2nd Division (Reserve Division) has been restructured nationally to better coordinate Defence engagement with other Commonwealth, state and territory organisations, the high representation of first responders, Australian Public Servants and critical medical practitioners in the Reserves has often resulted in these Reservists remaining in their core employment as this best meets the needs of rendering domestic disaster relief. This impacts the quantity and duration of reserve based support. An example was during Defence's COVID-19 response where the reserve element of the medical workforce largely remained in their existing employment in the public or private health sector resulting in the Defence medical commitment being largely reliant on the small ADF permanent force medical capability. This placed significant pressure on this workforce and had wider impacts across the ADF due to the enabling capability that the medical capability provides. This takes the form of health support to the ADF workforce, particularly in deployed and remote training areas. This pressure was relieved in October 2022

⁴ Using powers in the *Defence Act 1903*. Reserve service is usually voluntary. A callout mandates service. The callout was in force for the period 4 January – 7 February 2020. After 7 February Reserve support returned to the volunteer model.

⁵ *Defence Monthly Workforce Report as at 1 December 2022*

when the Deputy Prime Minister ceased Defence medical support to the national COVID-19 response. The ADF medical capability is currently in a period of reconstitution. Again, while in this instance this commitment did not impact Defence's ability to provide options to execute Government direction, it did impact the ability to prepare for other potential crises. Future commitments of this scale and duration in a complex and evolving strategic environment may not be without consequence.

The increased frequency and duration of ADF full-time and part-time personnel commitments to domestic disaster relief is a significant contributor to increased operational tempo (the rate at which Defence force elements are committed to operational activity). Increased operational tempo introduces workforce concurrency pressure. Concurrency pressures (the capacity of the Defence to maintain preparedness requirements while simultaneously conducting other directed operations) are particularly evident in niche and specialist areas, where continued deployment has resulted in workforce unavailability, reduced readiness, and skills fade in core operational skills (due to reduced training rates). Increased commitment of personnel to domestic disaster relief responses, with greater frequency and for longer durations, has required the ADF to implement escalating concurrency management measures. These include cancelling or modifying collective and individual training, and also limiting activities or deployments. These management measures will have a cumulative effect on Defence capacity and capability to meet primary role requirements if the present rate of support to domestic disaster relief continues or increases further and becomes enduring. The preparedness management system enables Defence to actively manage these risks and communicate them to Government to inform prioritisation.

The Government has directed the Defence Strategic Review (DSR) to '*assess the Australian Defence Force's structure, posture and preparedness in order to optimise Defence capability and posture to meet the nation's security challenges over the period 2023-24 to 2032-33 and beyond.*'⁶ The 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements identified that the ADF has finite capacity and capability. Continued ADF support to domestic disaster relief operations at the scale and duration of previous commitments could have significant impact on Defence preparedness and its capacity to mobilise in the face of more extreme threats. The DSR focus on security challenges in the short to mid-term will need to be reconciled with the current tempo of Defence's contribution to domestic disaster relief operations. The balance of Defence effort will likely need to be reviewed once the DSR outcomes are released by Government.

The impact on the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters

Defence is organised, postured and ready to respond to emergency requests from Commonwealth, state and territory organisations for domestic disaster relief, and continues to meet its operational commitments and requirements. The *DACC Policy* outlines the key principles for the provision of DACC. Key Principle One states that '*consideration is required to ensure Defence resources are used to deliver the core business of Defence*'⁷. This does not reduce Defence's responsibility to meet domestic essential community support requirements; it implies that prioritisation must occur to ensure that Defence resources are utilised when they are the most appropriate force, with consideration of risk incurred to the maintenance of ADF capability.

The strategic environment continues to evolve in ways that threaten the global rules based order. This increases the risk borne by Defence when supporting disaster relief operations due to skills fade in maintaining high end warfighting capabilities and by reducing the scale, duration and frequency of shaping operations in our region. This in turn may limit options to Government in times of crisis.

⁶ Defence Strategic Review, Terms of Reference for the Independent Leads of the Review, 3 August 2022

⁷ Defence Assistance to the Civil Community Policy, page 4, para 1.9

As a result of the increasing frequency of domestic natural disaster responses, the ADF workforce has experienced a pivot within primary role activities. The continued use of Defence personnel in domestic disaster relief operations is a contributing factor to workforce satisfaction. Defence is experiencing reduced retention and recruiting levels increasing pressure on ADF workforce availability. The ADF personnel separation rate has increased to 11.2% in Financial Year (FY) 21/22, up from 9.5% in FY 20/21. In addition, the ADF recruitment achievement rate decreased from 90% in FY 20/11 to 75% in FY 21/22. The Deputy Prime Minister stated in a speech in November 2022, “What is completely clear is that urgent action is required if we are to respond to our more challenging strategic environment, because right now we have a defence personnel crisis.” The ADF has heightened risk to its capacity to meet the full range of contingencies within its directed mission due to personnel availability, and this will continue if it is not addressed effectively. Retention and recruiting mitigation measures have been implemented but will take time to have an impact.

Alternative workforce models

The establishment of a scalable and deployable civil contingency workforce to support national crisis response and recovery could provide an alternative option to utilising the ADF workforce by increasing the threshold for requests. This could reduce operational tempo, training disruption and relieve workforce concurrency pressure, delivering an increase in workforce availability and corresponding maintenance of ADF capability for employment in its primary role. Defence is working with the Department of Home Affairs, National Emergency Management Agency and other Government agencies, to explore alternate models and options for national civil contingency capabilities and capacities.

Conclusion

Defence routinely provides support for domestic disaster relief operations and will continue to do so when requested. The increased scope, scale and duration of ADF commitments to domestic disaster relief has resulted in workforce pressure on both full-time and part-time personnel capacity. The increased utilisation of ADF capability and capacity during domestic natural disasters has required Defence to reprioritise its workforce and platforms to meet Government direction. This has impacted Defence’s capacity to conduct specific training, exercises and deployments that contribute to shaping operations in the region and prepare for more complex tasks in an evolving strategic environment. This may limit options for Government to prepare for and respond to future crisis.