



## **Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience**

### **Inquiry into preparedness, response, and recovery workforce models**

#### **Submission by NSW State Emergency Service (NSW SES)**

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## Introduction

The NSW State Emergency Service (NSW SES) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience inquiry into preparedness, response, and recovery workforce models.

NSW SES, as a member of Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC), has had the opportunity to review the draft AFAC submission. NSW SES is broadly supportive of the AFAC submission, noting, however, that many of the examples used in the submission reference the 2019/20 bushfire emergency. NSW SES suggests that these are equally applicable to the recent significant floods in NSW (particularly those in 2021/22).

This submission begins with an overview of the NSW SES and its role within State and Federal emergency management arrangements.

## About the NSW SES

The NSW SES was established in 1955 in response to extensive flooding that occurred in the Hunter Valley and Northwest NSW. The NSW government identified a need to involve communities in strategic planning for, and response to, flood and storm emergencies. Since then, the NSW SES has expanded to include preparing for and responding to tsunamis, along with a wide variety of other emergency response support roles that have become part of the services our volunteer-based organisation provides to communities of NSW.

The Mission of the NSW SES is: *Saving Lives and Creating Safer Communities*, and its Vision is: *A Trusted Volunteer-Based Emergency Service, Working Together To Deliver Excellence In Community Preparedness And Emergency Response*.

A key aspect of NSW SES service delivery is that volunteers are members of the communities they serve. They come from all walks of life, bringing with them many different skills, interests, and backgrounds. NSW SES volunteers are united by the purpose of supporting their communities in need.

NSW SES volunteers and staff are the frontline of emergency response and preparation in NSW. Volunteers undertake a variety of roles for the NSW SES including technical field operator roles (flood rescue operator, storm heights operator, general land rescue operator etc), incident management roles, field support roles, hazard planning and raising awareness through community education programs. They are supported by a small cohort of staff, both on the ground in State Headquarters.



## Organisational Profile

The NSW SES has over 10,000 volunteer members supported by over 300 salaried staff located across NSW. The NSW SES supports the community through 259 Volunteer Units across seven Zones which cover the entire State.

State, Zone, and Unit headquarters are equipped with incident command centres to support management and response to severe weather operations at State, Zone and Local level as required. Zone headquarters are located in the following locations:

- Metro (Rhodes)
- Northern (Metford)
- North Western (Tamworth)
- North Eastern (Goonellabah)
- Western (Dubbo)
- Southern (Wagga Wagga)
- South-Eastern (Goulburn)

The Zones are supported by the State Headquarters in Wollongong, which also houses the State Operations Centre (including the call centre for 132 500).

## Combat Role and Primary Functions

The NSW SES is established under the *State Emergency Service Act 1989* (NSW) (**SES Act**). Under the SES Act, the NSW SES has responsibility for the protection of life and property from storm, flood, and tsunami across NSW.

As part of this role NSW SES engages with communities to improve flood risk awareness and understanding, and the agency engages directly with local communities to build capability and disaster resilience. The organisation holds a key role in both disaster preparedness and emergency response for flood, storm, and tsunami.

In addition to its combat roles, the NSW SES provides specialist capabilities that include general land rescue, vertical rescue, road crash rescue, and alpine and remote area search and rescue and support other agencies during their combat roles. For example, providing resources in incident management and support functions, like logistics, during the bushfire emergency of 2019/20.

The NSW SES also supports other emergency services agencies, including NSW Police in searches for evidence and missing persons, and NSW Ambulance as community first responders in rural and remote locations.



## **State Emergency Management Arrangements**

NSW SES works with its NSW partner agencies under the emergency management arrangements set out in the *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989*, and the NSW Emergency Plan (EMPLAN) which clearly set out the respective agencies' responsibilities, both combat roles and support roles. In addition, the State Rescue Policy provides the guidance and framework in which multi agency rescue operations, including flood rescue, occur.

State agencies also use national emergency management arrangements, through AFAC and federal emergency management arrangements, to support State-based response.

## **National Emergency Management Arrangements**

NSW SES uses AFAC's National Resource Sharing Centre (NRSC) and the national Arrangement for Interstate Assistance (AIA), both to request resources for its activities when required, and to provide resources to other jurisdictions, when requested.

NSW SES uses the Commonwealth Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN) to request resources from the Commonwealth for such things as logistics, transport, and specialised equipment. However, NSW must demonstrate all resources within the state have been utilised/exhausted prior to making a request under the COMDISPLAN.

### **Response to specific terms of reference:**

#### **(a) current preparedness, response, and recovery workforce models, including:**

- i. the role of the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters,**

Defence Assistance to the Civil Community (DACC) provides for Defence assistance to NSW and other States and Territories. There are six levels of DACC assistance. The first three relate to emergency assistance:

- DACC 1 –localised, short-term emergency responses.
- DACC 2 –significant crisis response or relief assistance.
- DACC 3 –significant recovery assistance.

The Joint Operations Support Staff (JOSS) NSW is the Defence point of contact for emergency DACC in NSW. These are further defined in the AFAC response.



DACC allows some local support by ADF to agencies in areas directly adjacent to ADF facilities, under local arrangements. DACC allows for broader assistance under six categories, including emergency crisis response, and emergency recovery. The ADF plays a valuable role in supporting states and territories with emergency management activities, but NSW SES contends that it is not appropriate for the ADF to be constituted as a standing emergency response agency with specific obligations to respond to civil emergencies that are already the responsibility of State agencies.

In addition to the activities for fire response set out in the AFAC response, NSW SES has used ADF for flood activities in recent significant floods. This has included door knocking to warn communities, damage assessment and clean out of impacted properties.

The NSW SES supports the AFAC response that the ADF should be seen as a valuable partner and support to State based combat agencies, but not as a first responder for natural disasters. The ADF could, by extension of its current support to emergency services, also partner to assist those emergency services develop its own strategic capability, ie through exercising or training.

Emergency Services have had a reliance on the ADF to support aviation operations, particularly night-time operations due to a lack of sovereign capability. Whilst there has been significant investment in aerial firefighting resources over the past decade or more, particularly via the NAFC, this has not been replicated for flood responses. In addition, there is currently limited understanding of the actual capability of ADF available to support any particular emergency operation, including flood activities. This has the potential to deliver the wrong capability required to achieve an outcome, potentially compromising safety of personnel and the community.

NSW SES supports the AFAC response identifying the risk of duplication existing state and territory capabilities, imposing a significant skills maintenance burden over and above the existing commitments of ADF personnel to maintain readiness for ADF operations.

Furthermore, if the ADF was deployed ahead of local volunteers, this may undermine the value that volunteers see in their service and may result in additional difficulties in attracting and maintaining their service. The perception may be that this is now being provided by the ADF, and local knowledge is no longer required. This is in direct opposition to feedback from communities that local knowledge is essential in a successful flood preparation and response.

Our position, in line with the AFAC position, is that the ADF plays a valuable role in supporting states and territories with emergency management activities, but it is not appropriate for the ADF to be constituted as a standing emergency response agency with specific obligations to respond to civil emergencies.



- ii. **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,**
- iii. **the impact on the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters, and**
- iv. **the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations, and state-based services in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability;**

NSW SES is a NSW government agency which is comprised of highly trained and skilled volunteers and staff, many locally based, organised to deliver its legislative functions through the full emergency management lifecycle (Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery – PPRR). NSW SES currently works collaboratively with other NSW emergency services through emergency management arrangements to prepare for, and respond to, emergencies.

NSW SES supports the AFAC submission that the state based statutory authorities have the responsibility, under the laws of the various Australian jurisdictions, and the experience for emergency preparedness and response, and this should remain the backbone of emergency response in Australia. However, this framework should be the vehicle through which continuous improvement is delivered to meet the future challenges of climate change and community impacts.

**(b) consideration of alternative models, including:**

- i. **repurposing or adapting existing Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations, and state-based services, and**

In addition to the AFAC response, NSW SES identifies the opportunity for existing emergency services to play a greater role in the coordination of spontaneous volunteers and other groups to support a coordinated response and provide the best support to community, noting that community should always be at the centre of emergency management.

NSW SES has been making improvement in this space in recent years and has recently been provided with government funding to expand its programs and education and collaboration with communities at risk of flooding. In addition, NSW SES supports different ways of volunteering and supporting community resilience that expand on traditional volunteers, such as Community Action Teams and emergency caches. The success of these rely on integration with the connection of skilled and experienced volunteers and staff, and the support of the state based intelligence and warning teams.



**ii. overseas models and best practice;**

NSW SES supports AFAC's view that there is no undiscovered, alternative model for structuring emergency and disaster response that would provide previously unrealised benefits for the community. The current system provides an agile, community-based workforce for disaster and emergency response that is interoperable across the country and can be, and often is, deployed across jurisdictional boundaries to provide national resilience.

**(c) consideration of the practical, legislative, and administrative arrangements that would be required to support improving Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters; and**

NSW SES also advocates working within, and improving, current arrangements, rather than trying to create new systems. Agencies responsible for responding to events are already researching ways to improve response to emergencies and support to communities, such as through the Bushfire Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre and sharing the results through cross-agency collaboration such as AFAC.

These include not only response activities, and improvements to capability and training, but preparedness and prevention activities, such as closer collaboration with forecasting services, influence in appropriate land use planning decisions, better warning systems (including the use of social media) and community education and engagement that support resilience and preparation by the community. Research and experience shows state based agencies, and their members who are based in, and are part of, their communities are best placed to achieve this.

**(d) any related matters.**