



Australian Government

Defence

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
References Committee

The formation of a National Volunteer Incentive
Scheme (Climate Army) to respond to the
immediate aftermath of natural disasters in
Australia

Department of Defence Submission

February 2025

Defence Feedback to the Terms of Reference provided on the Climate Army.

Defence has sought to answer and provide advice on the eight listed items contained in the Terms of Reference provided for comment.

Defence notes there are no reference documents.

The statement of the Terms of Reference, as per the letter 'Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, dated 8 October 2024'.

The formation of a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) to respond to the immediate aftermath of natural disasters in Australia, with particular reference to:

1. Establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army);
2. Exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture;
3. Integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations;
4. Creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme that provides tangible benefits to volunteers and formally acknowledges their skills and contributions across sectors;
5. Investigating whether there are appropriate laws and safeguards to protect the health and safety of volunteers;
6. The structure and governance of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army);
7. Comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices; and
8. Any other related matters.

Defence offers in brief:

- In our experience, volunteering is successful when the volunteer is motivated by the purpose of the organisation. Climate volunteering may need to be seen to act in preparation and resilience, rather than response and clean-up.
- That further augmentation of the recovery phase (short-term and long-term) capabilities may reduce the impost on the ADF and encourages enhanced community-based disaster response arrangements, as demonstrated with recent force supplementation from Disaster Relief Australia (DRA) working in partnership with ADF in response to natural disaster events.
- Although not its primary role, the ADF has provided emergency assistance where required, by repurposing its capabilities and resources during and after natural crisis and national emergencies.

- That active preparation for a disaster, through a resilience ‘force’ or preparation phase, would reduce the impost on response and recovery phase capabilities. This in turn will support priorities outlined in the Australian Government National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework and National Strategy for Disaster Resilience.
- Our experience in training, organising and leading a professional group of young people provides useful insight into managing individuals during and following their period of service, including training and support.

Background

The Australian community relies enormously on national volunteer behaviour; this is part of our national character. The payment or non-payment for service is considered a significant differentiator in volunteer behaviour. For example, surf-lifesaving relies on both the sense of service to others and sports participation; coaching of children’s sports teams’ calls on our commitment to families, community and sports. Motivation is key to volunteerism.

Many organisations provide disaster recovery and response services. These organisations comprise full time, full pay, state and national agency emergency response organisations including police, ambulance, fire, and the Australian Defence Force; and professionally run and part paid volunteer (no-pay) personnel such as the Rural Fire Service, and State Emergency Services. There are also a number of locally based response and recovery groups, both formal and informal, such as Facebook groups created following the 2022 flooding event and the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association VIC established in response to the 2019-2020 bushfires.

Defence supports the addition of human and special equipment resources into the post-disaster recovery sector. Defence in coordination and at the request of the National Emergency Management Agency as the Australian Government lead is frequently required to support Australian communities in the ‘clean-up phase’ of a disaster, which draws resources away from our core role.

Resilience: Climate Army

Defence encourages development of resilience framing as the purpose of the Climate Army. Resilience framing focuses on disaster preparedness and changes in the climate. This would move the Climate Army away from roles already undertaken by emergency response organisations, into a more deliberate preparation of the community for the future events. Preparation strengthens resilience and reduces the potential consequences of a disaster. This might include community resilience (soft or human infrastructure) and physical (hard infrastructure) resilience.

Professional research shows that community preparation (soft infrastructure) for disaster events is significantly more effective than physical preparation. Japan prepares for tsunamis in various ways in different towns and prefectures. For example, a prefecture that relies on human interaction, support, rehearsals and preparation has routinely been significantly more successful in saving lives, than the prefectures and towns that rely on large concrete walls.

Addressing the Terms of Reference elements in turn:

1. Establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

Clarity of purpose is essential to encourage young people to participate in a Climate Army. Those motivated to act on climate are more likely to act in preparation for a natural disaster, rather than in response to one. There may need to be clarity on the roles and tasks that each young person will do in order to meet their continuing motivation for service. Should the roles and tasks be 'preparing for and waiting for the next emergency', their motivation to act may be diminished.

Targeted initiatives should apply universally across the response volunteer community, to assure common conditions of service. Incentives could be applied to current organisations conducting response to emergencies; like the Rural Fire Service, Country Fire Authority, Disaster Relief Australia (DRA), State Emergency Services, sports clubs and community clubs and organisations (Lions, Rotary). Limiting incentives to the Climate Army may draw away volunteers from organisations, which may prove counterproductive.

Defence could offer experience in the development of a connection with the young people through schools (cadet programs). Defence recruiting is enhanced by early introduction of lifestyle choice and volunteering, under the agreement and support of parents, through cadet programs resident in schools and local communities.

2. Exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture

Professional leadership and management is essential for a Climate Army. Further, the long-term sustainment of mental health post activation and post service within a Climate Army will require specific consideration and policy development. Defence could share our learnings with respect to service and potential for harm.

Previous consideration of schemes already conducted by Defence may give the committee some cause for further development of themes and ideas. Defence instituted a 'Ready Reserve Scheme' in the early 1990's. This national level scheme sought increased participation in Defence. At its core was a short service full time obligation followed by a longer part-time obligation, reciprocated by the government's support of their education at a tertiary institution. At a volunteer level, it was a successful scheme.

Compensation for service has a long history within Defence across a number of categories of service over time. Defence suggests that the motivation of our members depends upon both the purpose and values of the organisation and remuneration. Defence has a number of personnel surveys that may be shared with the committee on the nature of service motivation.

3. Integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations

As described earlier the Ready Reserve Scheme provides an example of a connection between service and educational outcomes.

Defence cadet programs maintain important connections with schools and local communities, and provide evidence that early engagement with young people has recruiting benefits.

Any form of educational return for service has potential for deeper consideration. Defence recognises the benefit of investing in personnel development, through education at a tertiary level and post-graduate studies and through professional qualifications. Any deeper education of the leadership of a Climate Army should include studies that will support their likely professional supervisory roles. Consideration should be given to establishing education for the Climate Army leadership in engineering, town planning, indigenous studies, environmental sciences and public health.

Defence is expanding the eligibility criteria to allow non-Australian citizens who are permanent residents living in Australia to apply to join the ADF. Defence is prepared to share our learning from this initiative, albeit early in its maturity noting that people open to joining Defence would likely share similar traits to people who wish to serve within the Climate Army. This was proven during Operation Bushfire Assist 2019-2020 when over 2,500 ADF reservists were called out to respond in their Defence uniformed capacity, having already supported the disaster event in a volunteer capacity. The connection with citizenship and service for those who wish to become Australian citizens may present an employment opportunity for the Climate Army.

4. Creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme that provides tangible benefits to volunteers and formally acknowledges their skills and contributions across sectors

The current qualifications system (Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)) is applicable across all trades and skills available to Australians. There does not appear, at first consideration, for the Climate Army to have qualifications that are different to those of the community that are not already well established within the education sector.

Defence service members receive recognised qualifications for their training. Defence is a registered training provider, and conducts training through other registered training authorities such as institutions of Technology. Defence training is recognised and transferable to other sectors within Australia.

5. Investigating whether there are appropriate laws and safeguards to protect the health and safety of volunteers

Work Health and Safety legislation would apply as it does to Defence and all other Australian service and response organisations. These laws provide appropriate protection for service in all Australian institutions, businesses and organisations.

6. The structure and governance of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

Defence supports deeper consideration of the model applied to Defence. While Defence has the Defence Act that constitutes 'command' as an applicable legal act, the provision of a separate Act is not likely for a Climate Army. Defence would recommend consideration of the leadership models used by DRA, Australian Border Force and police. Defence supports the establishment of a professional officer corps skilled in the leadership and management of a volunteer force, educated in a manner that gives them clarity of their roles within the Climate Army.

Previous advice to the Senate Committee [Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience] on climate resilience suggested that a resilience force (a Climate Army) be based locally and resourced by people who know the local area, while being lead strategically from a central headquarters location. The committee also received advice that included creation of a force informed by the indigenous knowledge of country of that region.

7. Comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices

Defence is not aware of a current best practice institution or model. Defence is aware of the benefits of resilience building and disaster preparation. Benefits extend to the population and to the Australian Defence Force. Building resilience and reducing the disaster effects before the event is a good outcome for all of the community. Defence recommends consideration of the Japanese efforts at local levels to reduce loss of life from disasters through soft infrastructure and education to support intergenerational disaster resilience.

Any Other Related Matters

Nil.