

I have been a State Emergency Service volunteer in Queensland for over a decade, in Australia's most disaster prone areas.

Much of the response to the immediate aftermath of natural disasters are currently responded to by state-level volunteer organisations. In the case of large fires, these are called variation of names including Country Fire Authority (CFA), Rural Fire Service (RFS) or Bushfire Service. In the case of flooding, rainfall and some other events, these are called a State Emergency Service (SES).

Australia needs to improve how it utilises volunteers across our geographically large country. However, any National body that does not set out to work with the existing state organisations will likely fail, if not from legal challenges on constitutionality, then by animosity and distrust from these existing organisations. Splintering the volunteer pool into state-aligned and federally aligned factions will benefit none except perhaps those paid to administer the fiefs.

**This issue could be resolved by state-based existing volunteer organisations being part of a system similar to the United States of America's National Guard.**

In that organisation, personnel normally under State management can be called to Federal service, with the US Government covering the costs of such a call-up. In Australia, this could look like "Federal-qualified" volunteers responding under the auspices of the Federal Government when they respond to major disasters on "Federal Service". To be clear, this service is NOT a military or armed force. As much as possible any Federal body should refrain from using the term "Army" or any other term that can be conflated with a warlike purpose. But a successful Federal organisation in the field of disaster response may allow the Australian Defence Force to refocus more on its primary warfighting purpose, to the benefit of the ADF.

The Australian States retain their own emergency services, just as American States get to retain their state military arm. The (Australian) Federal Government may gain some say in maintaining a common minimum standard, and provide funding to that end, but otherwise (Australian) state control is completely retained on a day to day basis.

For an extended disaster response, a volunteer's time often becomes a financial cost. This is an extremely tricky aspect to navigate, given that remuneration inherently takes away from the volunteer aspect. Most volunteers want to remain volunteers<sup>1</sup>, but that gets difficult for extended emergencies either local or to volunteer or requiring long travel distances, both of which necessitate forgoing paid work. The rent doesn't stop needing to be paid and the kids still need to eat when a volunteer is away helping the community. So there has been a lot of discussion about paying volunteers over the last few years, by people as eminent even as a former Governor-General.

It could then be difficult on when exactly to transition people who are usually volunteers to being remunerated, and back again. It's also going to increase the State's financial cost immensely. This is where a "National Guard" arrangement could further be of assistance. In that regard I suggest linking the transition of reimbursement inherently only to 'federal service' which would typically be in situations that today would qualify for Commonwealth disaster funding assistance. This provides a clear delineation that will lessen (but not prevent) the "what about me and my service?" aspect on who is getting remunerated for what.

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<sup>1</sup> "Why are Australians okay with the fact that firefighters based in rural Australia do not get paid" Reddit, an Internet Discussion board, January 2025  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskAnAustralian/comments/1hxpz1x/why\\_are\\_australians\\_okay\\_with\\_the\\_fact\\_that/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskAnAustralian/comments/1hxpz1x/why_are_australians_okay_with_the_fact_that/)

The other benefit of any remuneration of lost income coming from the Federal Government alone, is that volunteer effectively maintains a non-financial relationship with their own State helping to preserve the volunteer ethos.

Although it would be unlikely to as volunteer based, such a “National Guard” arrangement could also extend to aerial rescue and firefighting assets, including a provision for Federal Service of aircraft that are owned and operated by State Governments.