



Australian Government  
Department of Home Affairs



Australian Government  
National Emergency Management Agency



# Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

Discussion Paper – August 2023

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## Minister's Foreword

In Australia, we are all too familiar with the devastating impacts natural disasters have on our communities and our way of life. Our disaster management systems continue to be tested and stretched, as the frequency, intensity and concurrency of disaster events grows, due to climate change. Eighty per cent of Australians have experienced some form of disaster since 2019.<sup>1</sup> If you have been lucky enough not to be impacted by a recent disaster event, it is likely that someone close to you has.



Over the coming decade, we expect that a wide range of threats and hazards will come together, exposing gaps in existing capacity and placing increased pressure on governments, institutions, economies and communities. While we have collectively made progress to enhance Australia's disaster preparedness, response and resilience capability, we have to do much more to make sure we can handle the challenging future we expect to face. This is a whole-of-society issue that requires whole-of-society action.

The acceleration of major climate events risks overwhelming our emergency services, and national capacity to respond effectively. Over the last four years especially, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has played a critical role in providing assistance to the civil community in response to natural disasters. But this has come at a cost to our military's force preparedness, readiness and combat effectiveness.

In response to the *Defence Strategic Review*, released on 24 April 2023, the Government agreed in-principle to work with the states and territories to develop national resilience and response measures for adverse climate change at the local level without the need of ADF support, except in the most extreme emergencies. The Government also agreed in-principle that Defence should be the force of last resort for domestic aid to the civil community.

To ensure Australia is prepared to respond to these growing threats, the Australian Government announced a series of measures as part of the October 2023 Budget and the 2023-24 Budget to help communities strengthen their resilience and preparedness in the face of more frequent and intense natural hazards.

Complementing these initiatives, the Department of Home Affairs is engaging across all levels of Government, academia, industry and the not-for-profit sector to drive an ambitious national resilience agenda. Working closely with the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the Department leads on national resilience policy and strategy to better position Australia to meet the unprecedented challenges we face and manage increasingly complex, cascading and concurrent national crises.

It is inspiring to see that in the darkest of times, many of the most powerful stories of resilience are generated at the local level, and more often than not, the innovation and creativity of these ideas can be nurtured and adapted from one impacted community to support another. A comprehensive approach to building our national capabilities and addressing these challenges can be drawn from our collective expertise, knowledge and unique experiences.

This discussion paper sets out some of the shared challenges and opportunities posed by this problem and I encourage all Australians to have a say and contribute to the discussion about how we ensure that the Commonwealth Government has the right tools to manage national-level crises, and ensure we are able to protect people all around Australia whenever we are called, now and into the future.



**Senator the Hon Murray Watt**  
Minister for Emergency Management

<sup>1</sup> *Survey results: National study of the impact of climate-fuelled disasters on the mental health of Australians, 2023*





## Purpose and Scope

This discussion paper calls for views on the capabilities that the Commonwealth Government needs to have to support state and territory-led crisis response and recovery efforts as an alternative to the ADF.<sup>2</sup>

This discussion paper forms part of the Commonwealth's approach to public consultation, which seeks to gain insights from a broad range of stakeholders, including industry experts, non-government organisations, not-for-profit groups, volunteer organisations, corporate Australia, the education sector, state and territory Government agencies, local governments, unions, and peak bodies. The insights gained through public consultation will be used to inform potential long-term options to uplift Commonwealth capabilities, which will be provided to the Commonwealth Government for consideration.

While the Commonwealth is scoping alternative national capabilities, it acknowledges that crisis response and recovery begins at the community level, and as crises escalate, local governments and states and territories are the first responders in Australia's emergency management system – as enshrined in the Australian Constitution. The Commonwealth also acknowledges that the ADF will continue to have a role to play as the Commonwealth's capability of last resort in times of extreme emergency.

While this discussion paper focuses on response and recovery efforts, the Commonwealth Government also acknowledges that preparedness, prevention and resilience building efforts are critical to reducing the impacts of natural disasters on Australian communities. The Commonwealth funds a range of disaster resilience initiatives through the Disaster Ready Fund to address a broad range of natural hazards, infrastructure needs and for systemic risk reduction projects.<sup>3</sup>

In the near term, the Government continues to enhance Australia's current emergency management and recovery capabilities through the package announced at the 2023-24 Budget.<sup>4</sup> This suite of initiatives, led by NEMA and explored in further detail below, seeks to consolidate and enhance existing crisis management arrangements, particularly ahead of Australia's 2023-24 high-risk weather season.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to elicit feedback on longer-term, structural changes to Commonwealth capacities that may be required to support state, territory and locally-led crisis response efforts in the context of the broader strategic landscape, including the impacts of climate changes and other regional contingencies. Feedback on the discussion paper will inform the development of a suite of options for Commonwealth capability to enhance and broaden Australia's response and recovery measures – in turn, bolstering Australia's overall resilience to, and preparedness for natural disasters.

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<sup>2</sup> Emergencies that cause, or are likely to cause, nationally significant harm.

<sup>3</sup> [Disaster Ready Fund](#), 2023

<sup>4</sup> [Federal Budget 2023-24 – NEMA](#), 2023



# Understanding our existing emergency management arrangements

## Overarching Roles and Responsibilities

Australia operates under a federated system of government, with Commonwealth, state and territory and local governments responsible for different elements of the [prevention, preparedness, response, relief, recovery, reconstruction, and risk reduction disaster cycle](#),<sup>5</sup> and for broader disaster risk reduction activities. In addition to the efforts of Government, non-government organisations, businesses, communities and individuals also play a critical role in delivering coordinated resilience and response activities to confront all hazards.

## Australian Government Crisis Management Framework

The [Australian Government Crisis Management Framework](#) (AGCMF) outlines the Australian Government's crisis management approach and supports holistic risk management of all hazards – both natural and human-induced events.<sup>6</sup> The AGCMF is implemented through a series of national level crisis plans that detail the preparation, response and recovery phases of the National Disaster Management and Recovery Continuum.<sup>7</sup>

## Commonwealth

Under Australia's current emergency management arrangements, the states and territories have primary responsibility and accountability in emergency management functions. However, the Commonwealth can provide coordinated assistance when crises exceed the capacity and capabilities of a single state and/or territory.

The Commonwealth's involvement is triggered by criteria outlined in the AGCMF and are further detailed within the [Australian Emergency Management Arrangements Handbook](#).<sup>8</sup> The triggers to activate the Australian Government's whole-of-government coordination arrangements, as detailed in the AGCMF, may include:

- the scale of the crisis and its potential or actual impact on Australia, Australians or Australia's national interests
- formal ministerial consideration of the event
- a crisis affecting multiple jurisdictions or industry sectors
- a request from an affected nation, state and/or territory for Australian Government capabilities or assistance
- a crisis with both domestic and international components
- a crisis resulting in a large number of Australian casualties
- community expectations of national leadership and/or
- multiple crises occurring simultaneously which require coordination, resource prioritisation and de-confliction.<sup>9</sup>

The Commonwealth has two key organisations that give non-financial support to state and territory emergency management responses – NEMA and the ADF.

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<sup>5</sup> [Australian Government Crisis Management Framework \(pmc.gov.au\)](#), 2022, p. 11

<sup>6</sup> [Australian Government Crisis Management Framework, Version 3.2 November 2022](#)

<sup>7</sup> The National Disaster Management and Recovery Continuum, as outlined in the AGCMF, comprises seven phases of crisis management and recovery – prevention, preparedness, response, relief, recovery, reconstruction and risk reduction.

<sup>8</sup> [Australian Emergency Management Arrangements Handbook](#), 2023, p. 5

<sup>9</sup> [Australian Government Crisis Management Framework](#), 2022, p.10



### National Emergency Management Agency

NEMA was established on 1 September 2022 to provide a more coordinated approach to preparing for, and responding to disasters. NEMA provides national leadership and works with local communities, emergency services agencies, volunteer and not-for-profit organisations, and in collaboration with state and territories and local governments, so all Australians are better prepared for, and supported during and after disasters and emergencies. NEMA works to ensure that Australia is more resilient to disasters by leading national disaster and emergency management efforts, in line with the [National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework](#).<sup>10</sup>

NEMA is leading the implementation of a package of measures to consolidate and enhance existing crisis management arrangements ahead of the upcoming high-risk weather season, with a focus on:

- supporting non-government organisations, volunteer organisations and state and territory governments, through greater coordination of assistance via the National Coordination Mechanism
- enhancing the existing National Emergency Management Stockpile model to continue to rapidly support states and territories during a disaster
- continuing to support the growth of operations and capacity of Disaster Relief Australia
- working in partnership with governments, academia and Volunteering Australia to increase the number of volunteers involved in disaster resilience, response and recovery activities
- strengthening situational awareness and information sharing with decision-makers and stakeholders and
- expanding the National Crisis Exercise Program to improve emergency readiness.<sup>11</sup>

### Australian Defence Force

Although not its primary role, the ADF can provide emergency assistance where required, by repurposing its capabilities and resources during and after natural crises and national emergencies. This has historically included **planning support** (including in relation to recovery and response), **logistics** (including use of defence assets and infrastructure), **communications** (including emergency communications and aerial surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities), **transport of people and goods** by inland waterways, sea, land and air (including rescue and evacuation, resupply of essential goods and heavy lift capability), and **additional personnel** (including general duties support, such as search, road clearance, debris removal, emergency repairs and access control, and specialist support, such as medical and engineering personnel).

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<sup>10</sup> [National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework](#), 2022, p.10

<sup>11</sup> [Enhancing National Crisis Response and Recovery Capacities | National Emergency Management Agency \(nema.gov.au\)](#), 2023





## States and Territories

Australia's state and territory governments are responsible for the protection of life, property and the environment within their jurisdictions – this includes prevention and preparedness activities to mitigate disaster risk and impact, and response to and recovery from natural hazards.

States and territories are the first responders to any incident that occurs within the bounds of their jurisdiction. Each state and territory maintains its own emergency management legislation, processes, plans and arrangements to respond to crises, but have arrangements in place to share resources across borders if required. Where a crisis exceeds state and territory capacity to respond, states and territories can request additional support from the Commonwealth to bolster their response and recovery efforts.

## Local Government

Local governments play a key role in emergency response and recovery. This is due to their unique understanding of community-level needs, risks and vulnerabilities, and locally available assets and resources. They are also responsible for the construction, management, upkeep and rebuild of local road and community infrastructure, and managing large pieces of regional infrastructure that bind communities (such as bridges), and identifying communication infrastructure shortfalls for their region (such as blackspots).

Along with state and territory emergency services, local governments are an integral part of the emergency planning process, and play an important role in risk mitigation, land-use planning and land management. They are also able to support response and recovery efforts through the delivery of community services, such as through operating evacuation centres, relief centres and safe places.



## Volunteers, Not-for-Profit Organisations and Charities

The volunteer, not-for-profit and charity sectors are crucial parts of Australia's national response and recovery arrangements. Australia has a long and proud tradition of volunteering, particularly in the emergency management sector, with volunteers offering an invaluable asset – their time – to contribute to activities and causes they care about, without expectation of reward. Volunteers make up the majority of state emergency service personnel and are currently the foundation of Australia's workforce that responds to and supports recovery from domestic crises.

While the overall number of volunteers joining state emergency service organisations has been in decline since 2015, there remains strong community appetite to provide assistance in times of need.<sup>12</sup> Spontaneous volunteers are a crucial resource for Australia, often responding immediately at the site of an emergency and contributing to community-led response and recovery. Civilian groups, including volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services, are also essential in helping communities prepare for, and respond to emergencies. These groups supplement resilience building, preparation, response and recovery activities during disasters, while bolstering community cohesion and positive community connections.

A key challenge facing Australia's emergency management system is the potential 'double counting' of its emergency response workforce. This is important when assessing the feasibility of a surge workforce as many volunteers perform a range of different roles during a crisis. For example, volunteer firefighters and first aiders are often also Army reservists, police, nurses and doctors.<sup>13</sup> As a whole, the emergency management sector also faces competition from other sectors when trying to retain high-demand workers, such as search and rescue pilots, medical staff, and engineers.

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<sup>12</sup> [Volunteering and Australia's crisis resilience](#) (2022), Volunteering Australia p. 9

<sup>13</sup> [Defence cannot — and shouldn't — just walk away from disaster recovery](#), Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2022



## The problem: A more challenging future

### More frequent, severe, complex, cascading and compounding crises at home

Australia is likely to see an increase in the frequency and severity of natural hazards – driven by global climate change. Australia has warmed, on average, by  $1.47 \pm 0.24^{\circ}\text{C}$  since national records began in 1910, with most warming occurring since 1950.<sup>14</sup> In the coming decades, Australia will experience more challenges from its weather and climate, including more extreme heat, less cool season rainfall causing droughts, and an increased number of dangerous fire weather days.<sup>15</sup>

Australia also expects to face a future punctuated by more complex crises – particularly crises that occur at the same time or directly after one another. In 2022 alone, Australia faced damaging floods, cyclones and storms in every month of the calendar year, with every state and territory impacted over the course of the year – often with multiple jurisdictions impacted concurrently. These natural disasters also came at the same time as millions of Australians were impacted by cyber-attacks and many communities were still dealing with the impacts of COVID-19. These types of crises are likely to exacerbate a range of pre-existing vulnerabilities in Australia's systems, institutions and supply chains, placing our communities under enormous pressure and making recovery even more challenging.

These crises will continue to **cascade** nationally, meaning that one natural disaster is increasingly likely to cause another (such as cyclones causing floods; or fuel loads caused by floods in one year increasing the severity of fires in subsequent years). This cascade of crises affects various aspects of Australia's economy, environment, supply chains and infrastructure. Australia also expects the impact of these crises to **compound** – meaning that the increasing frequency and severity of disasters impacting people from season to season (often without respite) are likely to cause more severe damage and harm because communities are already trying to recover from the previous crisis and are vulnerable.<sup>16</sup> Remote and very remote communities are particularly susceptible to compounding crises due to a narrow economic base, infrastructure with limited resilience and a lack of redundancy for essential transport routes and communications infrastructure.

Australia's future landscape for natural hazards is also likely to significantly impact First Nations communities. For example, the Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group has identified that First Nations communities in Northern Australia are accustomed to flooding that wet seasons have brought for millennia, but are not prepared to deal with the increased frequency, magnitude and severity of impact of inundation now occurring. The long-term impacts on the well-being of First Nations people as disaster events increase are yet to be fully understood.

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<sup>14</sup> [State of the Climate 2022](#), CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology p. 4

<sup>15</sup> [State of the Climate 2022](#), CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology p. 3

<sup>16</sup> [Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report](#) (Royal Commission), 2020, p. 22



## Findings of the Defence Strategic Review

Currently, the ADF is the Australian Government's primary (aside from direct funding contributions) and most visible physical mechanism to support state and territory-led crisis response and recovery activities. Whilst ADF support is considered as 'non-financial' support, deployment of ADF personnel and capabilities still incurs significant financial costs for the Commonwealth. Opportunity costs are also significant where the growing scale and frequency of national-level crises has resulted in the ADF being increasingly used to support state and territory-led responses to domestic emergencies.

The [Defence Strategic Review](#) found that the ADF is not structured or appropriately equipped to act as a domestic disaster recovery agency concurrently with its core function, the defence of Australia and its national interests, in any sustainable way.<sup>17</sup>

In response, the Government agreed in-principle to the Review's recommendation that the Commonwealth work with the states and territories to develop national resilience and response measures for adverse climate change at the local level without the need of ADF support, except in the most extreme emergencies. The Government also agreed in-principle that Defence should be the force of last resort for domestic aid to the civil community, except in extreme circumstances. These recommendations will be further developed and considered as part of the National Defence Strategy to be delivered in 2024.

With the increasing likelihood of natural hazards that will compound and cascade, there will be increased pressure on governments, institutions, economies and communities to respond and recover. While the Government will continue to invest in all components of Australia's national resilience, response and recovery – it is likely that the Commonwealth will face increasing requests for assistance during times of crises. Alternative options for Commonwealth capacities are vital to support local and state and territory-led responses and enhance Australia's resilience to natural disasters.

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<sup>17</sup> [National Defence, Defence Strategic Review](#), 2023, p. 41





## Opportunity for reform

The changing threat landscape means that we collectively need to re-think how the Commonwealth brings capabilities to bear in response to more frequent, more severe and increasingly national crises, how those capabilities support state and territory-led response efforts and how to enhance Australia's capacity to manage future national crises.

In parallel with building Australia's response and recovery capabilities and investing in initiatives that will help our communities for the disaster seasons ahead, the Department of Home Affairs and NEMA are developing options for Government consideration on longer-term, systemic changes that are required to meet the challenges of the future.

It is clear that, where needed, the ADF will be available to assist states and territories in delivering domestic disaster relief – in extreme circumstances or where specialist capabilities may be required. However, these longer-term options will consider new ways to build Australia's capacity to handle concurrent crises and build capabilities that Australians can have confidence in and enable effective national responses. This will assist in ensuring the ADF can continue to focus on its core functions relating to the defence of Australia and its national interests.

Any options will need to be able to scale to meet the size of the challenge, be able to be deployed at a national level, but also need to be able to support and integrate with state and territory and local government response and recovery efforts. These options would also build on and leverage the collective capabilities and capacities of industry and the not-for-profit sector (including volunteer organisations), and their critical role in the emergency management system.

We are also interested in your perspectives on barriers that could be removed or incentives that could be generated to grow key sectors across the spectrum of capabilities needed for emergency response and recovery – so that in the future, Australia has the ability to harness latent capability that might exist in the Australian market.

To help us address the challenge outlined in this discussion paper, you may wish to consider the below questions:

- Acknowledging the primary role of state and territories in emergency response, what longer-term capacities and capabilities does the Commonwealth need to develop to meet the challenges of the evolving strategic environment?
- At a national level, what are likely to be the key pressure points or challenges for the Commonwealth responding to competing and concurrent crises?
- How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?

- What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?
- What models could the Commonwealth explore to replace or supplement support currently provided by the ADF during domestic crisis?
  - What does the right mix of Commonwealth capabilities look like?
  - How could a Commonwealth workforce surge capacity be replicated in a scalable, efficient and effective way?
  - How could we harness the critical role of volunteers and civilian groups under this model?
  - How do these models supplement, but not replicate, existing models operating at a state and territory and local level?
  - What role could industry / the private sector play? How can the Government attract increased investment in emergency management from the private sector?
  - What gaps currently exist in state and territory emergency management capability?
- Are there sectors that could replicate the capabilities provided by the ADF?
- What are the critical functions the Commonwealth Government should continue to perform in disaster relief and recovery, in support of local, state and territory governments?
- What legislative, regulatory or policy changes could be undertaken to make it financially viable for other sectors to contribute to a Commonwealth crisis response capability?

## Next steps

Using the questions above to guide a response, the Department is seeking your views, ideas, and offers of assistance, on how to best enhance Australia's national level emergency response capabilities. We are particularly interested in the perspectives of peak bodies, private sector organisations, academia, and key stakeholders operating in the emergency response and recovery space, including representatives from State, Territory and local government, not-for-profit groups and community organisations.

The Department of Home Affairs and NEMA will use information gathered from submissions to inform the policy development process and advice to Government on potential options.

PDF submissions to this discussion paper can be uploaded via the enclosed [hyperlink](#).

**Submissions close 11:59pm Wednesday, 20 September 2023.**

Submissions received after this deadline may not be considered. Submissions received will be made public – unless there is a request for it to be kept confidential (subject to legal requirements, such as those imposed by the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth)).

If you have any questions in relation to enhancing Australia's emergency response capabilities or wish to submit a confidential submission, please feel free to contact us through [NationalResilience.Consultation@homeaffairs.gov.au](mailto:NationalResilience.Consultation@homeaffairs.gov.au)