

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

Output. 2.4

Question No. 100

Senator Barnett asked the following question at the hearing on 27 May 2008:

Please provide a copy of each of the following reviews:

- a) Re-entry of the US Satellite
- b) Northern New South Wales floods
- c) Far North Queensland and Southern Queensland floods

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

(a) Re-entry of USA 193 Satellite

Background

USA 193, a US experimental satellite, malfunctioned shortly after entering low earth orbit and was not responding to radio command messages. US Government advised the Australian Government that they expected it to re-enter Earth's atmosphere around 6 March. Official US information did not provide any detail on likely impact sites from the re-entering satellite.

The satellite was fuelled with Hydrazine which is a highly flammable toxic chemical that is carcinogenic and attacks the human nervous system and internal organs. It was determined that it was probable that the remaining Hydrazine would burn off on re-entry.

Operational Coordination

On receipt of information detailing the re-entry of US193, Emergency Management Australia (EMA) undertook the following:

- Established a planning group to address the consequence management aspects of the possible impact of debris on the Australian mainland;
- Convened a meeting of the augmented Australian Government Counter Disaster Task Force (AGCDTF);
- Conducted a Teleconference with members of the Australian Emergency Management Committee (AEMC);
- Conducted a Teleconference involving hazardous material experts from Commonwealth Departments and States and Territories; and

- Developed a Concept of Operations drawing on aspects of Australian Contingency Plan for Radioactive Space Re-entry (AUSCONPLAN-SPRED) and The Commonwealth Government Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN) and distributed to stakeholders.

Lessons Identified

- A “Hot Wash Up” meeting was convened on 7 March 2008 to discuss the operation and it was determined that a review of AUSCONPLAN-SPRED was required. The existing plan primarily focuses on the re-entry of radioactive debris and does not adequately address other type of debris such as hazardous and non-hazardous material.

Action

- A review of AUSCONPLAN-SPRED is currently underway and involves Australian Government and State/Territory agencies. Mr Paul McAlonan is the action officer in this matter.

(b) Northern NSW Floods and Far North; and

(c) Queensland and Southern Queensland floods

Background

In July 2007, the Attorney-General's Department Coordination Centre (AGDCC) was formed and assumed the functions of the EMA Duty Officer. The NSW and Queensland Floods that occurred in January 2008 were the first operational activations since these new arrangements were implemented.

Operational Coordination - New South Wales Floods

Due to heavy rain, flooding commenced in NSW on 05 January 2008. Localised flooding impacted a number of areas of the State including: Tweed Heads, the north coast and mid-north coast of NSW.

- EMA continued to monitor the situation although no request for assistance was received and no Australian Government Emergency Management Plans were activated;
- Standard relief and recovery assistance measures were made available under Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) to a number of affected local government areas;
- On 08 February 2008, the Australian Government agreed to additional assistance under the NDRRA, in the form of clean up and recovery grants of up to \$5,000 for eligible small businesses and primary producers.

Operational Coordination - Queensland Floods

While flooding continued in NSW, heavy rain in the Warrego River catchment threatened to inundate the Western Queensland town of Charleville. Flooding continued in Western & Central Queensland over the following weeks.

- On 18 January 2008, EMA received a request for assistance to transport temporary flood barriers from NSW SES to Charleville
- As a result of this request EMA activated COMDISPLAN and coordinated the delivery of these barriers
- On 25 January 2008, EMA received and coordinated a second request for assistance to provide helicopters to assist in the delivery of fodder in the Emerald region. The ADF provided two Blackhawk helicopters in response to this request
- The temporary flood barriers were returned to NSW SES in April and COMDISPLAN was returned to status Green on 14 April 08
- The Queensland Government notified five separate NDRRA eligible flooding events from January to March 2008 which affected 136 local government areas. Standard NDRRA measures were implemented along with Australian Government agreement to jointly fund clean up and recovery grants of up to \$10,000, or up to \$25,000 in exceptional circumstances to eligible small businesses and primary producers – this assistance was limited to certain local government areas and certain events.
- In addition, a payment of \$500,000 was made to a public flood relief appeal on request by the Prime Minister and a second payment is anticipated shortly.

Lessons Identified

Following these events EMA held a series of meetings to discuss current arrangements and identify areas requiring enhancement. This culminated in a meeting of IMF staff and Duty Managers which was held on 03 April 2008. Below are a list of recommendations identified which are currently being actioned.

Actions

- Reviewed Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). These included developing templates for Situation Reports, Briefings, Task Requests and Plan Activation Notification;
- Reviewed IMF Information Management System – NOGGIN, made changes and developed SOP's;
- Developed and delivered briefings to State and Territories stakeholders on the new Emergency Management arrangements at the Australian Government level in conjunction with the AGDCC;
- Scheduled a review of COMDISPLAN. The review is scheduled to take place between July and September 2008;

- EMA is reviewing the current Disaster Earmark Store arrangements;
- Quarterly Duty Manager workshop;
- Allocated resources to manage the development and delivery of operational training for EMA staff;
- Identified the need to increase awareness and educate key stakeholders on the activities and communication requirements before, during and after an NDRRA eligible event