

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AFFAIRS

Mr Zed Seselja MLA (Chair), Ms Karin MacDonald MLA (Deputy Chair), Ms Deb Foskey MLA

**INQUIRY INTO ACT FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES
ARRANGEMENTS**

Mr Zed Seselja MLA

Chair,

Please find a short brief surrounding my considerations of the current arrangements in place for the ACT Emergency Services Agency. As a member of the ACT Community for the past 30 years I have gained extensive experience in emergency management both in the Australian Federal Police and the ACT Fire Brigade.

Over the past decade I have been directly involved in the management arrangements of the ESB and ESA. It is my aim within this short brief to be positive and if required be available to answer or substantiate any of my considerations with the committee if so called.

Yours sincerely

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Introduction

As a former member of the ACT Fire Brigade, I had the opportunity to gain first hand the leadership and management effectiveness of the Emergency Services Agency (ESA). The purpose of this paper is to advise the Committee of the writers perspective of the appropriate strategic approach required to deliver robust emergency management arrangements in the Australian Capital Territory.

An emergency management organisation and individuals operating within this environment will always be better equipped for crisis (and daily operations) when the executives and managers ensure that they build and forge strong relationships across the Community and the agencies that work with them to ensure that public safety is maintained and that our community is not vulnerable at the time of a major emergency or natural disaster.

Background

The four ACT Emergency Services who have been combined into the ESA have had a strong history within the Australian Capital Territory. Distinctly loyal to there own cultures the Fire Services, the Ambulance Service and the State Emergency Service have worked under the same banner for over 14 years, however they remain fiercely independent. During this period the cultures have resisted change and hung onto there own independent approach to delivering their respective services.

Right through the nineties the inability of the Emergency Management Group (EMG) and the Emergency Service Bureau (ESB) to secure an appropriate budget restricted any vision of having a sustainable, vibrant and healthy service, delivering effective emergency management arrangements.

With a financial minimalist approach any vision for developing a robust organisation was constricted to survival and delivering what is essential on a daily basis rather than having a strong capacity to prepare the community for inevitable disasters or emergencies. The above statement is supported by an inability by the then ESB to perform during the January Bushfires of 2003.

Immediately after the 2003 bushfires the ACT Government enlisted Mr Ron McLeod to undertake a report on those fires and his 61 recommendations were all taken up by the Government prior to the inquiry and inquest into the fires by the Coroner. It must be highlighted that since 1985 the agencies within the now ESA have had many reports undertaken of which many recommendations were considered but not fully implemented.

The Emergency Services Authority was formed as an independent group in July 2004 and significant resources were delivered to improve on the capacity and capability of all the services.

It was in June 2006 that the Government announced that the Authority approach would be disbanded and that the ESA would be placed back under a Government Department, Justice and Community Safety (JACS) as was previously the case immediately prior to the bushfires.

In March of 2007 the Minister for Police and Emergency Services announced a new management structure which had been borne by the frustrations of continued budget overruns. The four Chief Officers were reduced to two Deputy Commissioners and various portfolios were placed under the new Deputy Commissioners.

Questions Posed by the Committee

1. What is the preferred organisational structure for emergency services operations to achieve the most efficient and effective service?

It is paramount that our community and our emergency service workers safety be considered when developing an appropriate structure for the ESA.

The Government, the Department and the ESA need to be confident that the current arrangements will deliver appropriate planning, response and recovery arrangements for the Territory and in so doing effectively cover the risks that they have considered or they could consider as professionals. Thus ensuring the ESA and its staff have the capacity to assess, plan, exercise and regularly review to be prepared for emergencies and disasters.

The most relevant question is does the Territory wish to have four separate services operating under one administrative arm or would it be more advisable to have a single Fire and Emergency Service including the ACT Ambulance Service.

The moving of ESA under the Police as is the case in the Northern Territory or contracting services from New South Wales as was recommended by the Coroner (*Recommendation 22 – resources and strategies*) needs to be fully assessed. Has the ACT Government analysed and assessed this area? And if so is the report into this analysis available to the community?

The preferred structure is one that will cover public safety, regulatory compliance and meet the operational delivery requirements of a contemporary emergency service agency. For the past 20 years it has been clearly evident that the upper management structure has struggled to deliver on all components of emergency management at all times successfully. The need then to ensure that the leadership, management and supporting administrative arrangements are satisfactory can only be assessed by an independent group to ensure that internal bias does not sway arguments for their own benefit.

The preferred organisational structure is one that can deliver within allocated costs and meet the possible vulnerabilities and risks that our community may face.

2. Who should take primary responsibility for the various aspects of bushfire management: prevention, preparedness & planning, response, recovery?

The current bushfire season operates for about 6 to 7 months each year dependant upon weather conditions. The very context of having multiple services in a Territory this small will always add a layer of confusion across Departments. Within the ACT there are now three Fire services operating who have genuine interest in all of the above aspects of bushfire management. Can the ACT afford to have three Fire Services, the ACT Fire Brigade, the ACT Rural Fire Service and the TAMS parks officers?

Duplication is a significant issue which must be addressed by Government to ensure that tax payers are funding a single approach to bushfire and emergency management, ensuring that clear policies and practices are adopted on behalf of the Territory.

3. What is the appropriate level of responsibility to place on land managers with regard to preparation, planning and response to wildfire events?

Land management practices should compliment the appropriate arrangements in preparing the land to mitigate the possibility of wildfire events within particular land tenure areas. Land Managers in combination with a single Fire Service need to have a unified approach to the management of land in ensuring the impact of fires is lessened.

The responsibility should sit with one executive officer who has the capacity to deliver the appropriate arrangements on behalf of our community. With shared arrangements then the argument of responsibility could possibly cloud the effectiveness of delivering the appropriate community outcomes.

4. What is the responsibility of residents on the urban interface with regard to preparation, planning and response to wildfire events that threaten their property?

Each individual has a responsibility to ensuring they are prepared for emergencies and the cumulative effect on mitigating emergency incidents in our community, the responsibility is then borne by a two prong approach the resident and the Government. A partnership arrangement with the community and the various departments is required to ensure that our whole community approaches the issues surrounding wildfires from an informed position.

5. How can the public best be informed about wildfire events as they unfold?

Modern technology has placed an inordinate amount of responsibility on emergency agencies to inform the public immediately of dangers being faced during either an emergency or disaster. Often is the case that emergency services have not arrived on scene to appreciate the nature of the incident, yet other onlookers are recording the incident and querying why actions have not been faster.

The immediate dissemination of valid information to an appropriate web site and to radio stations can only be based on how information is relayed to the person/s responsible for that incident. Once they have the information a public information message can be formulated and passed on.

Therefore the validation of information and then its dissemination to the community must be combined through a single approach by an appropriate public information/media area for the ACT Government.

6. What should be included in public education and awareness campaigns? How are these best delivered?

The interest of members of the public in relation to emergencies is often not realised until they have personally been involved in an event. Information that has over times been sent to residents could have been placed in a draw, binned, not read, or the residents have moved.

What should be included is a general and broad safety awareness program for all types of emergencies and natural disasters, which has long been discussed, the questions is will our communities be interested if they haven't previously been affected?

Encouragement and awareness of what to do in case of an emergency is one of constant vigilance and ensuring that information is presented to children during their informative years. Schemes where children are informed about emergencies three times over their school years appear to have the greatest success where information is imparted and remembered through reinforcement methods.

7. What should the role of the ACT Bushfire Council be?

The Bushfire Council is an independent group that does advise both the Minister and the Commissioner of ESA regarding the strategies being considered in preparation for the wildfire phenomenon. The current arrangements form as an audit to business arrangements and provide an appropriate approach to testing whether or not the Government's approach has considered various options and possibilities in dealing with bushfire preparedness.

8. What is the appropriate level of resourcing for each service and the Emergency Services Agency as a whole?

To ensure the ESA is appropriately resourced the Government must be confident that they have prepared the personnel of ESA and the Community to deal with emergencies and disaster incidents.

The following key strategic issues must be addressed to lessen the vulnerability of our community at the time of an emergency or disaster and more importantly must be appropriately funded to ensure the organisation is prepared;

- i. A Leadership Development Program in place
- ii. An Emergency Management Planning cell
- iii. Training and Exercise regimes to prepare staff and test plans across the whole Territory
- iv. Command, Control and Coordination arrangements that affect Unified Command across all services
- v. An appropriate model to support the delivery of all services. The decision to either formulate one service or not! (Independently reviewed)
- vi. An effective Community Education program
- vii. Communication strategies to inform the public at times of imminent danger
- viii. Single Governance arrangements, including the Values and expectations of the Agency through JACS.
- ix. *The Budget that has the capacity to support the key strategic issues and infrastructure in delivering services to meet Public Safety arrangements at the time of an incident and the above key areas will be the appropriate one.*

The essential part of this whole approach is leadership, and the job of the ESA is to develop future capabilities. It will be to increase the ESA's capacity to be focused, agile and resilient now and into the future in preparation for emergencies.

There are really only two ingredients required for organisational success: leadership and culture. Since the EMG/ESB and now ESA have been formed they have been dealing with five separate cultures which have actively impeded the approach to emergency management practices within the Territory.

Government need to ensure that the appropriate funds are being allocated to the ESA and the leadership cadre need to effectively develop the strategic position of the future organisation. Considering the risks and the vulnerabilities' of the whole Community and organisation are essential.

What is being done and **what isn't being done** are two key points that must be tabled in such a manner that both Treasury and the Government can isolate where they are not meeting reasonable community expectations. What does the community expect of its emergency services is the real answer here and as is always the case will be tested and scrutinised by both the Media and the Community immediately after an event.

Are the ESA and the Government prepared for this scrutiny and will they cope with the resource surge at the time of a large incident? Are they prepared for worst case scenarios or are they happy to risk manage things on behalf of the Territory. Whilst occurrences are not regular, it often appears that we do not learn from lessons learned and that the focus becomes on the dollar rather than public safety. Governments remain willing to take the risk. This of course is

a decision for the Government.

Is the structure robust enough to deal with a major event and is it capable of delivering on all risks that could be considered probably not!

9. What should the staffing arrangements be in the Emergency Services Agency and brigades?

Staffing arrangements need to be based on work levels relative to business activity and supported by appropriate data analysis which is linked to work level demand. This may vary based on activity at any time of the day, although the capacity of the services to call upon trained and prepared staff at the time of an emergency must also be factored into workforce planning arrangements. It is paramount within this approach that the ESA and Government allow for a surge of personnel required at the height of a major incident.

Incorporated within these considerations will be how work place collective agreements and staff entitlements affect the workforce formula.

10. What replacement or additional equipment is required?

Current equipment arrangements should be covered in the strategic asset management plan (ESA – SAMP) and over a period of time if followed and resourced will pick up any anomalies within the current backlog/deficiencies.

11. What is the preferred approach to fire access and fuel management?

Land managers need to be appropriately resourced to ensure that the upkeep of trails and that the necessary body of work's on land can be maintained from year to year. Any deviation from required work will see the deterioration of access and management arrangements.

12. What is the preferred approach to control and containment of fires?

Based on the nature and type of fire, the weather conditions, the fuel type and topography, the fire is in will have a significant impact on how to deal with a fire. It is therefore important to have well developed teams who work well together to ensure an incident action plan for the scenario being dealt with can be implemented quickly.

It is then incumbent on the Incident Controller/Fire Commander to distribute the objectives and goals of that plan to ensure that "the Commanders intent" and that the "rules of engagement" for mitigating the fire are understood by all personnel across all agencies.

Most importantly is a single approach from one agency not three!

(Note: significant issues will arise in other areas such as high rise fires, flooding, building or structural collapse and a focus just on bushfires is insufficient to address emergency management arrangements)

13. Is a policy of suppression of all fires appropriate, particularly in natural reserve areas?

Again this is a matter for the land manager/s to determine, based on the danger being presented and whether or not it is viable to use the fire as part of a mosaic approach to lessening the impact of fuels within the park. If the fire can be contained within boundaries and successfully controlled then it will be a matter of risk assessment and acceptance. The accountability then remains with the decision maker.

14. Is there currently adequate co-operation in coordination between the emergency services units; between emergency services and land management agencies; between ACT and interstate emergency services agencies?

Goodwill across agencies exists whether or not the same strategic position is discussed, agreed upon or delivered. If agencies are found wanting at the time of an incident and whether or not they are capable of working together comes back to understanding and appreciating each others roles in delivering their respective services to the Community. The building of relationships across agencies in the region will be dependant upon the capacity of the ESA to send personnel to appropriate forums and conferences not only in NSW but the whole of Australia.

Lessons learned from major events suggest that a continued program such as the London Resilience approach is most prudent method to adopt. Are we prepared?

15. How could these be improved?

Planning, training and exercises develop interagency rapport and capacities to deal with incidents. A commitment to such activities is the only way of developing such an improvement. Unfortunately such programs do have the continued commitment of their departments to be resourced and are often the first things to drop of reduced funding allocations.

16. Are there possibilities of shared resources with interstate? What are the implications?

Yes! It is a case of availability and costs. The current loss of the ACT Fire Brigade aerial appliance would be costing the Territory a considerable amount of money per week, until the appliance is fixed or replaced.

The size of the ACT and the impost on the total budget has generally limited the approach to emergency management arrangements over and above the day to day environment. The internal supporting infrastructure within ESA is insufficient to ensure that all legislative obligations are met. The need to seriously consider outsourcing emergency Services and contracting them in to the Territory needs to be assessed.

The training regime and impost on resources of smaller agencies often does not see the appropriate level of training being undertaken especially across external agencies such as Police and recovery agencies, especially Health.

17. Do the policies and operational plans adequately set out the roles and responsibilities of the parties, the preferred approach to each stage of the bushfire management (prevention, preparedness & planning, response, recovery)?

With any policy or plan the proof is in the ability for all staff across all agencies to understand their roles and complete the necessary tasks at the time of an incident and follow the known plan, if its gathering dust, not being used and staff are unfamiliar with it then it cannot be effectively utilised.

Without testing and exercising the arrangements it is impossible to work through anomalies within the documents to determine the appropriateness of the approach and considerations for dealing with an incident.

How often plans are tested and exercised across all Government agencies is the answer to having appropriate response and recovery arrangements. Do all departments and staff understand how they work cooperatively and collaboratively together at the time of an incident?

18. Do the current structures and policies reflect the lessons learnt from the 2003 bushfires?

Considering the structure and staffing arrangements of 2002 and to appreciate the capacity of the ESA today would suggest that history may repeat itself, however only time will tell. The ESB of 2002 is very similar to the ESA of today!

19. Communication Vulnerability

If the ESA has the capacity to surge at the time of an incident and communicate effectively across all Government agencies and with the Community in the ACT together with the region then they will be getting close to being prepared.

The significant issue for the Territory are the two Communication centres being operated by Police and the ESA, the chance of mixed messages or information not being passed across services must remain and issue for both groups.

20. Final Comments

Over the past 21 years I have observed the professional staff across all agencies within the ESA. They have performed admirably on a day to day basis and at all times delivered a top quality service to our Community.

The key to the future is development of those staff to lead the organisation into a rapidly changing environment that will see issues such as global warming, diminishing water supplies, cultural diversity and the social-economic situation affecting the capacity of the ESA in delivering its services into the future.

It is essential that an appropriately resourced vision for the future of ESA is financed and supported by Government and with our Community.