

Meeting the Natural Disasters Challenge

By David Prestipino

Floods, bush fires and tropical cyclones occur regularly across the Australian continent, causing more than \$1.14 billion damage each year to homes, businesses and the nation's infrastructure, and serious disruption to communities. Research indicates that more extreme weather events, and large-scale single events such as more severe cyclones, storms, floods and wildfires, are expected in the future.

A major report recommending a new, more coordinated approach to natural disaster management in Australia was released in February 2004.

The scope of the review encompassed all elements of natural disaster management including land use planning, building standards, insurance, the needs of remote indigenous communities, relief and recovery arrangements and more.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned the review in June 2001 to identify the strengths and weaknesses of current arrangements for managing natural disasters. A High Level Group (HLG) of senior officials from Federal, State and Territory governments and the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) was established to undertake the review. The HLG was chaired by the Secretary of the Australian Department of Transport and Regional Services, Ken Matthews. The work was supported by a Review Secretariat with staff drawn from the Department of Transport and Regional Services and the Queensland Department of Emergency Services.

The HLG met on ten occasions to examine the matters specified in the Terms of Reference. The group also had the benefit of two meetings with specialists to examine aspects of the review, and of 24 submissions received from a range of interested stakeholders, including the participating governments, ALGA, academics, scientific and research bodies, community groups and industry organisations.

The review concluded that current natural disaster arrangements could be improved. Central to the recommended new approach is a systematic national process of disaster risk assessments and, most importantly, a fundamental shift in focus towards cost-effective, evidence-based disaster mitigation. This represents an historic shift from disaster response and reaction, towards anticipation and mitigation.

A key recommendation of the review is that all levels of government agree to a comprehensive five-year package of 12 commitments (see box) to reform the way natural disasters are managed to achieve safer, more sustainable communities and regions in economic, social and environmental terms.

The Council of Australian Governments agreed in principle to the review's recommendations in December 2003. It was also recognised that implementation of the reforms should commence as soon as possible and work is now under way on the implementation of a number of recommendations. One of these is the Disaster Mitigation Australia Package which

includes a new funding program for natural disaster mitigation.

The new Natural Disaster Mitigation Program will provide funding for a range of natural disaster mitigation works, measures and related activities. These could include disaster research, risk assessments and mitigation strategies; structural works and disaster-resilient infrastructure; warning systems, community education campaigns and other preparedness measures.

The program was officially launched by the Minister for Local Government, Territories and Roads, Senator the Hon Ian Campbell, on 1 April 2004. Local councils and other eligible organisations will shortly be invited to submit applications for funding of suitable projects in 2004–05.

In launching the program the Minister said:

"We can't control the forces of nature, but we can be better prepared to reduce loss of life, injury and property damage. Under this program, the Australian Government in partnership with the states and territories will help communities develop a clearer understanding of the natural disaster risks they face and assist them to adopt strategies to minimise those risks."

COAG agreed that an Augmented Australasian Police Ministers' Council will have overall responsibility for the implementation of the review's recommendations. The Council will be supported by the Australian

12 Reform Commitments:

1. Develop and implement a five-year program of systematic and rigorous disaster risk assessments.
2. Establish a nationally consistent system of data collection, research and analysis to ensure a sound knowledge base on natural disasters and disaster mitigation.
3. Develop, for each level of government, a natural disaster mitigation strategy to be implemented by the Commonwealth and each State and Territory commencing in year 2, and by local governments in year 3.
4. Take action to ensure more effective statutory State, Territory and local government land use planning, development and building control regimes that systematically identify natural hazards and include measures to reduce the risk of damage from these natural hazards.
5. Support cost-effective natural disaster mitigation measures through a Disaster Mitigation Australia Package, consisting of a new Disaster Mitigation Program and continuation of the Regional Flood Mitigation Program, to address the risks identified in (1) above.
6. Reduce the problem of public infrastructure repeatedly damaged by natural disasters through cost-effective mitigation measures to make infrastructure more resilient, where feasible, by proactive measures under the Disaster Mitigation Australia Package, and post-disaster measures under the Commonwealth Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements.
7. Develop jointly improved national practices in community awareness, education, and warnings, which can be tailored to suit State, Territory and local circumstances.
8. Enhance the Commonwealth Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements to better support community recovery from natural disasters and agree to ten complementary model State and Territory arrangements providing more equitable natural disaster relief and recovery assistance nation-wide.
9. Endorse a set of national cost-sharing principles for natural disaster management that includes a focus on the responsibilities of individuals, businesses and insurers, as well as those of governments.
10. Support emergency management volunteers in tangible ways and remove obstacles to their involvement in community safety by addressing key priorities, namely legal protection, financial incentives, recognition and training needs.
11. Establish new national machinery consisting of a Ministerial Council or Ministerial Implementation Forum, and a National Emergency High Level Group, to ensure effective collaboration and coordination of Commonwealth, State, Territory and local government action in implementing the reform commitments.
12. Endorse a statement of contemporary roles and responsibilities of each level of government in natural disaster management.

Emergency Management Committee (AEMC). A charter for the new AEMC has been prepared and agreed to by all jurisdictions. The AEMC will be chaired by the Secretary of the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department—Mr Robert Cornall, with a Secretariat provided by Emergency Management Australia (EMA). EMA is the Australian Government agency with responsibility for national coordination during disaster and emergency events. EMA is an agency within the Attorney-General's Department.

Other Ministerial Councils will have responsibility for their relevant components of the reforms, including, significantly, the Local Government and Planning Ministers' Council, which will play a major role in the implementation of land use planning reforms that address natural hazards.

More information is available on the website of the Department of Transport and Regional Services at <http://www.dotars.gov.au>, or via EMA at www.ema.gov.au

Copies of the Summary Report are being sent to all local councils and a range of other stakeholders. To obtain copies of the Summary or the Report, phone freecall: 1800 026 222

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Working with Communities on Disaster Management



During the review, the High Level Group developed the diagram above which represents the key elements of disaster management. They are mitigation, preparedness, response, relief and recovery. The activities involved are not sequential, and aspects frequently take place concurrently. For example, immediate response to a disaster situation, and immediate help for the affected community, usually occur at the same time.