The role of local government in agricultural emergencies

Eggleston and Koob examine the vital role played by local government in agricultural emergency management programs

Abstract

As the closest level of government to communities, local government has a key role in community emergency management and is part of whole-of-government emergency management arrangements. Local government prepares, or participates in, the preparation of local risk assessments and risk management reports; uses building and planning approval processes to reduce risk; prepares, or participates in, the preparation of local emergency plans, including planning for the mobilisation of local government and contracted resources; participates in training and exercising programs; and supports emergency services and the community during and after emergencies.

Why does local government participate in emergency management?

The emergency management systems in Australia are based on the principles of:

- all hazards (generic arrangements should be developed for all conceivable emergency risk);
- all agencies (a whole-of-government approach should be adopted);
- comprehensive (emergency management should include prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery); and
- a prepared community.

As the closest level of government to communities, local government has a key role in community emergency management (Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, 2001; Montgomery, M., 2003; NSW SEMC Committee, 2004). They possess a detailed and intimate knowledge of the community they serve on a day-to-day basis and of the environment in which they operate.

The health, welfare and infrastructure functions of local government are an integral part of government service delivery. The protection of these services from risks, continuity of these services during and after emergencies, as well as the delivery of extra services during emergencies, is the basis of their role in emergency management. An often-overlooked part of the role of local government is that of leadership. Affected communities are known to look to local elected members for advice and to local government staff for assistance and support.

As a consequence, in most Australian jurisdictions local government is recognised and depended upon in the whole-of-government emergency management arrangements. As part of these arrangements local government:

- prepares, or participates in, the preparation of local risk assessments and risk management reports;
- uses building and planning approval processes to reduce risk;

- prepares, or participates in, the preparation of local emergency plans, including planning for the mobilization of local government and contracted resources;
- participates in training and exercising programs; and
- supports the emergency services and the community during and after emergencies.

A major agricultural emergency, such as an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, would have a huge impact on the community that goes beyond those that are directly affected, like farmers. It includes huge social and economic consequences. These negative impacts can be mitigated through co-ordinated actions preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from such an emergency.

The remainder of this article addresses how local government can include agricultural emergency and risk management in their generic emergency management programs.

Reducing the risk of agricultural emergencies

The key to risk reduction is the assessment of risk and the identification of the best balance of risk treatments (Emergency Management Australia, 2000). In local government areas where a significant part of the economy, or large sector of the community, is dependent on agricultural production, it is essential that those risks to and from agriculture be assessed. Such risks can range from weeds (an enormous creeping disaster in some areas), to plague locusts, diseases such as avian influenza, viral haemorrhagic septicaemia in fish, foot-and-mouth disease, or plant pests and viruses. Advice should be sought from the jurisdictional primary industry, agriculture or fisheries department as to what the major agricultural risks for a given local area may be, based on the mix of agricultural production in the area.

In fulfilling the role of development assessor and approver, local government is the first line of defence in ensuring the risks posed to and by intensive agricultural premises are appropriately managed. Such premises could include piggeries, poultry farms, feedlots, abattoirs and fish farms. Development assessment processes are intended to deliver economic, social and environmental outcomes. In this light, local government could request, as part of the development consent:

- contingency planning covering disposal of animals destroyed during an emergency; and
- biosecurity planning including the management of run-off to minimise the spread of diseases and pests, or contamination of the environment.

As part of the local spatial plan local government could consider the separations necessary between such premises to minimise the spread of diseases and pests.

Local government could also fence off landfills to prevent pest animals such as feral pigs having access to waste, or implement a feral animal risk management program if fencing is not a viable alternative. As part of the pest and disease notification systems, local government could also promote reporting of any signs of possible animal or plant pests and diseases as early as possible.

Preparing for agricultural emergencies

Preparing for agricultural emergencies from a local government perspective has at least three aspects.

The first aspect is ensuring the continuity of service provision under sometimes trying emergency circumstances. This requires business continuity planning to:

- minimise the impact of a major agricultural emergency on the community;
- minimise the disruption of the provision of services by local government; and
- contribute to community and industry recovery.

The second aspect is local government input to local emergency planning, including:

- identifying intensive agricultural premises;
- describing their role in response to and recovery from an agricultural emergency;
- describing resources at local government's disposal that may assist in the emergency response;
- identifying possible sites for control centres in conjunction with the jurisdictional agricultural agency; and
- identifying possible sites for the large-scale disposal of destroyed animals and contaminated material in conjunction with the jurisdictional agricultural and environmental protection agencies.

In order to be understood and tested, such emergency plans would be the subject of staff training and exercising.

Responding to agricultural emergencies

Any emergency response action taken by a local government must be part of the jurisdictional emergency arrangements and structures, which vary slightly from State to State. Independent action outside of the existing framework may not be beneficial to the response and may not be eligible for reimbursement under emergency response cost sharing arrangements. Requests for action of local government during an agricultural emergency may include:

- conducting area and route control;
- closing roads and providing signage for closures and diversions;
- providing field staff for an agricultural emergency response;

- providing equipment for an agricultural emergency response;
- undertaking public and environmental health duties;
- assisting with animal disposal/ burial sites;
- assisting in the establishment of a control centre and providing personnel; and
- providing information to and from the community to assist in the response.

Eligible costs incurred by local governments in assisting in an animal emergency response will be reimbursed under existing arrangements. Local governments should discuss this matter with their agricultural agency during their planning stages to have the current cost sharing arrangements explained to them.

Recovery from agricultural emergencies

A major agricultural emergency could have the same short, medium, and long-term impacts as any other natural or technological disaster.

"Whatever the type of incident, the normal functioning of the individuals and community affected are likely to be disrupted. A disaster precipitates a sequence of events which affect the function of a community and the individuals which make up the community." (Emergency Management Australia, 1996)

Recovery activities will commence at the same time as response activities, and the community impact is likely to be broader than just the affected primary producers. Community and industry recovery is likely to take a much longer period to achieve than the emergency pest or disease control phase. Studies of the effects on animal disease emergencies have often reached very similar conclusions.

"At the individual and family level, the social impacts could range from strains on family relationships that are normally associated with adverse events and loss, through to severe mental disorders. At the community level, the impacts could range from a breakdown of normal community activities in the midst of quarantine and movement restrictions, to the changes in interpersonal relationships affecting the longer-term cohesion of the community." (Productivity Commission, 2002)

Local government can assist community recovery by co-operating with the jurisdictional emergency recovery committee and agency including:

- assessing the community impact of an agricultural emergency;
- continuing to provide information on the emergency and on recovery processes;
- coordinating local service provision; and
- assessing the impact of industry restructuring and closures on the community and assisting in any proposed changes and community adjustments.

Conclusions

Agricultural emergencies are a part of the all-hazards approach to risks and emergencies, and local government is the front line of the whole-of-government approach. The leadership of local government is necessary to build community resilience to any emergency, including those that may affect our vital primary industries.

References

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