

FOREWORD

by

Naomi Brown, CEO, Australasian Fire Authorities Council

Strong communities are the backbone of Australian society. They are the source of vital volunteers to work alongside paid emergency workers and increasingly an integral part in the management of the range of emergencies that affect this country.

As the majority of fire and emergency management agencies and authorities have discovered, involving and educating communities to identify the risks and prepare for appropriate action in an emergency is imperative. So much so that the majority of Australian fire and emergency management agencies have entire departments dedicated to Prevention and Community Safety.

The Australian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) is working side-by-side with EMA on projects aimed at improving community safety and assisting community resilience. Sadly, over the past few years there have been a number of large bushfires that have devastated many Australian states and territories. These fires led to coronial inquiries and the establishment by the Prime Minister, after the 2002-2003 bushfire season, of the COAG Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management. Together with EMA, AFAC's member agencies have played a leading role in the implementation of the findings of the inquiry.

A lot of people lost their homes and a few their lives during these fires and AFAC, through its Community Safety Group — made up of AFAC member agencies, including EMA — is continually looking at methods of improving community safety and resilience whether it is through the development of a national position on Stay & Defend Or Go Early or recommending which type of smoke alarm is the safest for the Australian public to purchase for their homes.

Although involving communities often received limited consideration during emergency management planning and emergency operations in the past, recent events here in Australia and worldwide have necessitated a change in thinking by the country's fire and emergency services organisations.

At the recent International Emergency Management Conference (IEMC) *Reaching Beyond Catastrophe – The Return Journey* in Adelaide earlier this year, delegates explored the issue of building community resilience.

Its organisers stressed that disasters are events that impact on people and communities, and managing and

supporting affected people is a major part of dealing effectively with a disaster. Recovery is enhanced when there is a sense of 'community', where people, both the victims and the responders, feel supported before, during and after a disaster.

Resilience involves engaging communities by helping them help themselves, harnessing the power of volunteers and developing self-reliance via local issues and solutions.

AFAC currently has a strong association with EMA. Fostered over many years this relationship is evident in the many collaborative arrangements that exist between the two organisations.

The organisations are currently developing (with others) national arrangements for Universal Search & Rescue (USAR) and the establishment of a common incident management system for Australia.

Also, of particular interest to AFAC at the moment is the project being undertaken by AEMC's National Community Safety Working Group that is researching the effectiveness of community education programs being used by a wide range of emergency agencies across Australia. This work will help us understand what works for which parts of the community and in what circumstances.

AFAC looks forward to continuing its excellent working relationship with EMA with a common goal of fostering safer and stronger communities in all Australian states and territories.

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The Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) is the peak body that represents the fire, land management and emergency services agencies in the Australasian region. AFAC is an independent, not-for-profit organisation whose operations are principally funded through the contributions of its member agencies.