

Climate change and the volunteer emergency management sector

Major General Hori Howard, Chair of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteers' Forum, discusses the potential impact of climate change on the capabilities of the volunteer sector.

Introduction

Climate change scientists tell us that we can expect more severe weather, with higher rainfall in coastal regions, more severe storms, cyclones forming further south and elevated sea levels. Inland, higher temperatures are expected, along with more severe and sustained droughts and heatwaves, which will increase the number, intensity and duration of bush fires, and heat casualties.

It is of concern that the fact that the lead agencies for all of these expected effects (except drought), are volunteer agencies, doesn't seem to be getting the attention that other aspects of climate change are attracting. Even with drought, the volunteer recovery agencies have day-to-day welfare roles as well as their emergency roles, so they can expect to experience considerable additional pressure for their services as well. I am not convinced that there has been any wide acknowledgement as yet that the sector will need to be strengthened considerably if it is to handle the expected increase in natural disasters.

As some would have us believe, the volunteer emergency management sector is not in crisis but it is showing some strains and with an expected increase in operational commitments, it is now necessary for governments, the community and sector leaders to take firm steps to strengthen it.

This paper examines some of the above pressures and suggests solutions hopefully prompting those in authority to look more comprehensively at what can be done to ensure that the volunteer emergency management sector can handle what is increasingly seen as a much harsher natural environment.

It is important to appreciate that there is already considerable action within the sector to improve our capability, as operational demands have been increasing steadily over recent years, so the sector is, at least in part, already dealing with the problem.

The volunteer emergency management sector

The organisations that constitute the volunteer emergency management sector are also the main members of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum (AEMVF) that was established by Emergency Management Australia following the 2001 Volunteer Summit. They are:

- ADRA Australia
- ANGLICARE
- Australasian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigade Associations
- Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council
- Australian Council of State Emergency Services
- Australian Government's Department of Attorney General (EMA) (ex officio)
- Australian Institute of Emergency Services
- Australian Red Cross
- Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Association
- Council of Ambulance Authorities
- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (ex officio)
- NSW Volunteer Rescue Association
- Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol
- St John Ambulance Australia
- St Vincent de Paul
- Surf Lifesaving Australia
- The Salvation Army
- The State Emergency Services Volunteer Associations
- Volunteer Ambulance Officers Association
- Volunteering Australia

There are also numerous other organisations that assist during emergencies at State and local levels, particularly in the recovery area. While they may not be members of the AEMVF, their important contributions are acknowledged, as is the need to attend to their viability as well as the member agencies.

Many senior people, even from within the emergency management industry do not see beyond response agencies. The volunteer recovery agencies particularly are the unsung heroes of our emergency management system, but they often do not rate a mention during the coverage of emergencies, even though without them there would be no recovery system in Australia. Indeed, in some States some recovery agencies are not properly integrated into the recovery systems. Integrating recovery agencies into existing infrastructure should be a priority for system leaders.

The AEMVF consider that the six main pressures faced by the sector are:

- Ageing Population, Sea Change, Tree Change, Rural Restructure.
- Community and Political Expectations.
- Increasing Time Commitment.
- The Costs of Volunteering.
- Legal Action.
- Lack of Recognition.

Ageing population, sea change, tree change, rural restructure.

As our population ages, the number of younger, fit people available to join the emergency management agencies, particularly the front line agencies, which need a high percentage of volunteers fit enough for field work is falling, and our existing members are ageing. There are also many areas particularly along the coast, which are becoming giant retirement villages, where the problem is particularly severe. Sea and tree changers, even the younger ones, are less likely to join local volunteer organisations than the original residents, who grew up with the local hazards and generally relate better to their community.

The rural restructure has seen the creation of corporate farms made up of up to 10 original family farms, with fewer workers. Many small communities have also lost much of their infrastructure such as shops, banks etc, along with their employees, who are often forced to move away. There is already pressure on the local emergency volunteer organisations in many smaller communities due to declining numbers.

These phenomena are already occurring, and the sector is coming to grips with the new environment. Most States have a good capacity for out of area operations, where volunteers are able to move to assist in areas remote from their home bases. However, there are still a couple which need to improve this capability. At national level, recent events have shown a similar capability for one State to help another, but the arrangements need to be reviewed regularly to ensure that the capability is maximised. A sleeper here is that

employers are generally less happy to release their volunteers for operations in someone else's patch, than they are for those which occur close to home.

The sector is regularly encouraged to recruit more females, as though this is something new. Most organisations have been actively recruiting female volunteers for some years. The AEMVF position is that any organisation which doesn't encourage females to join is denying itself access to 50% of the population and this is simply the height of foolishness.

Dramatic options such as combining organisations will need to be examined. This is already occurring in some of the more remote areas of Western Australia, and it is working well. There is of course likely to be a cultural problem with this proposal, but it must be considered. The main practical problem would seem to be the need for volunteers to undertake additional training if they are to take on additional roles in an environment where time is the greatest enemy of volunteering. At the very least, organisations will need to create strategic alliances to maximise their capacity to help each other, or they may be forced into combinations which don't suit.

Community and political expectations

There is no doubt that community expectations have grown tremendously over the last few years, putting pressure on for quicker responses, and calls for tasks to be undertaken which should be carried out via insurers or the householder. It is likely that we have been partly at fault here by assuring people that we will take care of them.

All organisations have recognised this situation and have begun to emphasise in their public education programs that people have a basic responsibility to look after themselves, because the emergency agencies can't be everywhere. We need to keep hammering the self-help message home, along with the need for preparedness, as there is ample evidence that we haven't yet succeeded in changing behaviour. Public education needs more human and financial resources in the volunteer emergency management sector, as it is an area of significant weakness.

Along with increased community expectations has come increased political pressure to complete operations more and more quickly. Politicians today seem to be more sensitive to criticism than in the past, and of course with the ever present media looking for mistakes, the volunteers ultimately suffer the criticism.

Our political leaders will sometimes need to run interference for us, not add to the pressure, so both political leaders and the media need to be re-educated about the nature and difficulties of launching emergency operations quickly, and the sector needs to review its public information and media capability.

Again, we believe that this is a general weakness across the whole sector in terms of people and money devoted to it. Additionally, media presence is inevitable and all agencies need to learn to work more effectively with it.

Time

In the several surveys run since the first Volunteer Summit in 2001, the biggest barrier to volunteering within the volunteer emergency management sector has been shown to be the increasing time commitment in an environment where work and family pressures are also on the rise. The 2006 survey showed that the average commitment is weekly and that the basic volunteer devotes over 200 hours annually. The commitment of those in leadership positions is much higher. It also showed that 75% of the volunteers are employed, so the need to balance volunteering against work and family commitments is a major issue.

Emergency sector organisations need to be very flexible in the attendance requirements they place on their volunteers, which need to be minimised, other than for operations and essential training. They have tended to be quite rigid in the past, but the more progressive are already introducing new volunteering options which require less time commitment than has been the standard. Community Fire Units, where local residents receive very basic bush fire training and equipment, and agree to protect their home patch is one excellent example of the type of imaginative solutions which we will need.

Training needs to be streamlined and minimised without compromising standards. This can be done, and is being addressed in the review of the Public Safety Training Package by introducing Skills Sets as alternatives to full Certificates of Competence. There is also likely to be a need for the employment of more paid trainers so that training can be delivered quickly and efficiently, and mainly in the volunteers' home bases. Time spent travelling to and from training is wasted time, and volunteer trainers, while quite competent, are not coping with the increased workload, which has resulted from the adoption of competency based training.

Equipment is becoming more sophisticated, and with it has come the need for more time to be spent on maintenance. At the same time there are more management and administrative tasks to be carried out at local level, which many volunteers really object to. This keeps surfacing as a major issue, so it should be taken very seriously. Targeted recruiting for headquarters type positions assists to reduce the administrative load on the operational volunteers, and there could well be the need for paid administrative staff at local level.

This is already being tried in the South Australian Country Fire Service, and will no doubt need to be examined elsewhere as well.

While fundraising brings volunteers together between operations, fosters teamwork and keeps them before the attention of the community, it must be controlled or it may become just another source of time pressure.

In considering time, the employers who allow their employees to take time off work to respond to emergencies, should not be forgotten. There is employment protection legislation for the volunteers in most States and Territories, and in the new National Employment Standards Legislation, but while incentive schemes for employers have been spoken about for years, there is still nothing significant in place.

Such a scheme needs to be national in nature, and something needs to be done about it soon. Experience so far is that employers have been really good, but we can't afford to lose their support, and the prospect of their volunteers needing to spend more time away from work could stretch the friendship too far in an increasingly tough economic environment.

The cost of volunteering

Volunteers don't want to be paid for their services, and they accept that there will be a personal cost to being an emergency sector volunteer. However, they expect that the costs will be kept to a reasonable level, and this is not necessarily the case these days. The AEMVF has a position which is that emergency sector volunteers should be provided with protective clothing, safety equipment, training and professional development, free of charge, and be able to claim reasonable out of pocket expenses. .

We also believe that volunteers who suffer severe financial hardship due to extended operational commitments, such as occurred in the 1994 and 2001 bush fires, should be able to receive financial assistance. The precedent has been set, and while the take-up was low, the gesture was appreciated. Unfortunately the assistance was not extended beyond the volunteer fire fighters in 2001, and this caused great dissatisfaction. If such assistance is to be provided, it must extend to all responders, not just some of them.

Legal action

While the protection offered to emergency sector volunteers against litigation has improved considerably over recent years, there is still a deal of uncertainty about whether it will be effective, as it has never been tested in court. There have also been examples of volunteers being subjected to intense cross examination during extended coronial enquiries following bush fires, which has caused extreme personal distress. It has been suggested that national Good Samaritan legislation is needed as a means of additional protection.

Recognition

At the Volunteer Summits held in 2001 and 2005, and since, the most recurring theme from the volunteers has been that they feel they are taken for granted. We believe that one of the main underlying causes for this theme is the fact that a number of the organisations are not adequately resourced for their roles, and the volunteers translate this problem into a lack of recognition by governments of the importance of what they do. This is a difficult problem because there is no real consistency of funding of organisations between the States and Territories, even within like organisations

There is no doubt that a number of the organisations within the sector will need to be better resourced if they are to withstand the pressures of climate change, and that this will require joint approach by all levels of government. If the volunteers are provided with appropriate resources for their roles, it is highly likely that their problem with a lack of recognition will largely disappear.

A recent statement by Dr Judy Esmond sums up the need for recognition very well. She said and I quote: "There has never been a volunteer who has left because they were appreciated too much. However, there have been hundreds across all sectors who have done so because they felt unappreciated."

Recent developments

Last year the Ministerial Council on Police and Emergency Management tasked the Australian Emergency Management Committee to investigate the Attraction, Support and Retention of Emergency Management Volunteers. While this project was not generated specifically due to climate change, it should help highlight the main issues within the sector. The AEMVF has been consulted and members have provided individual input.

We await the outcome of this project with interest as there has been a great deal of talk over a number of years, about providing tangible support to the sector, but there has been very little action.

There is provision for the granting of community service leave for emergency sector volunteers in the draft national employment standard, which will go before the Parliament in 2009.

Most of the States have introduced payroll tax exemption for employers whose employees are involved in responding to emergencies as volunteers. This is a nice gesture, but we are told that unless the period is extended or the numbers large, it is not really worth the paperwork.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a serious need for governments, the community and organisations to understand that the lead agencies for all of the likely effects of climate change are volunteer agencies, some of which are not well-resourced.

While changes in the way volunteers are managed are needed to strengthen the sector, the most consistent complaint from the volunteers is that they are taken for granted. The AEMVF believes that if agencies are properly resourced, most of the issues associated with recognition will solve themselves.

AEMVF's message is that all emergency management sector volunteers should be provided with protective clothing, safety equipment, training and professional development, free of charge and be able to claim reasonable out-of-pocket expenses. If they suffer financial hardship due to extended emergency operations, they should be able to access financial assistance.

For further information on the AEMVF please visit their website at www.aemvf.org.au.

About the author

Major General Hori Howard served in the Australian Regular Army. His last military appointment was as Director General of the Natural Disasters Organisation. He was a Director General of the New South Wales State Emergency Service. For two terms, he Chaired the New South Wales State Emergency Management Committee.

In 2001 and 2005, he was a member of the management committee for the National Emergency Management Volunteer Summits, and produced the reports for both. In 2005 he was also appointed as chair of the National Flood Risk Advisory Group, a sub-committee of the Australian Emergency Management Committee.

He currently holds the position of Chair of the Australian Council of State Emergency Services, and Chair of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum.