

Integrating emergency services

How WA is merging fire and emergency services agencies

Commonwealth and State Government policy directions are driving major change throughout the public sector. As a result, public sector organisations have to look deep within their operations, identify core services, services they provide well and ones they do not. In a nutshell, the message 'is shape up or be shipped out!' In Western Australia, the *Bush Fire Service*, *State Emergency Service* and the *Fire and Rescue Service* are being brought together under the umbrella of the *Fire and Emergency Services Authority of WA*.

For organisations to gain control of their futures, it is necessary to clearly identify where they are going, manage stakeholders effectively to meet their changing expectations and to achieve results in terms of increased customer service delivery and in meeting the demands of government within tight budgetary constraints. Most will be aware that some significant changes have been occurring in the fire and emergency services portfolio in Western Australia and that a new structure has been created to accommodate these changes. However, many will not be aware of the details. As the CEO of the new *Fire and Emergency Services Authority*, or FESA as it is now commonly known, I am pleased to be able to share our experience in Western Australia in bringing three agencies under the one umbrella.

FESA: the background

In June 1997, the Minister for Emergency Services announced the establishment of an Emergency Services Taskforce to progress the implementation of a new structure to improve coordination and planning across the Emergency Services portfolio.

The Minister identified four key outcomes the Government wished to achieve:

- overall improvements in the effectiveness and coherence of policy development and implementation
- a coordinated approach to planning and management matters across agencies
- improvements in the delivery of service to the community and volunteers
- savings through the rationalisation of corporate services, which will be redirected to operational areas.

The Taskforce submitted its Report on 1 October 1997 containing 63 recommendations and as a result FESA was created

by Bob Mitchell, CEO,
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Authority of WA (FESA)

as a Department under the Public Sector Management Act on 1 January 1998.

The establishment of FESA has effectively brought together, under the auspice of one Chief Executive Officer and one Board of Management, the *Fire and Rescue Service* (FRS), the *State Emergency Service* (SES) and the *Bush Fire Service* (BFS).

Emergency services in WA

The FRS consists of both career and volunteer firefighters, whose roles include prevention, structural and bush firefighting in gazetted fire districts and attending road rescue and hazardous material incidents throughout the State.

The FRS has career firefighters throughout the metropolitan area and the larger regional centres of Albany, Bunbury, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie and Northam. These areas are funded 12.5% each by State and Local governments and 75% through a fire service levy on insurance premiums. Albany, Geraldton, Bunbury, Kalgoorlie and Northam have a mix of both career and volunteer firefighters. There are approximately 100 towns throughout regional WA that support a volunteer FRS brigade. These brigades are funded 100% by State Government. There are approximately 720 volunteer bush fire brigades throughout WA. These brigades provide fire prevention and suppression services to the remainder of the State including the outer metropolitan areas of Perth. Funding and equipping these brigades is the responsibility of the relevant Local Government Authority under the Bush Fires Act 1954.

There are 82 State Emergency Service units that assist the community in times of crisis such as storms, floods, cyclone and earthquake. The SES is funded through a variety of sources, including the State and Federal Governments, and relies upon the support of local government authorities.

So it is a complicated task consolidating the emergency services in Western Australia and there was, and still is, a number of key issues that needed to be addressed.

FESA budget and staff

The new authority now manages a substantial budget. The cost of services

provided by the three agencies is \$85 million per annum. This does not include the contribution of volunteers, which is estimated to be well in excess of \$15 million per annum. The agency receives funding from a variety of sources, including the Federal, State and local governments, the insurance industry and donations.

FESA is in a sound overall financial position with liabilities of \$50 million against assets of \$109 million. There are 1100 permanent staff and 20,000 volunteers between the three operational divisions.

The key issues

Planning for the future

The establishment of FESA on 1 January, 1998, has provided an opportunity for the organisation to establish a planning process across its constituent divisions that provides direction and focus for emergency services in WA.

We have now commenced organisational strategic and business planning to take FESA into the 21st Century. Our planning process is designed to be highly consultative process to ensure ownership of the strategic direction.

It is widely debated that there are at least two well used approaches to implementing the developmental process: top-down or participative. The top-down approach involves the imposition of objectives that are established by senior management without meaningful consultation, greater concentration of authority, narrowly prescribed levels of discretion and reliance on hierarchy, and imposition of managerial performance standards. My view is that for an emergency service organisation this is wrong. We have adopted the participative approach that involves widespread employee and other internal and external stakeholder participation.

FESA's mission, vision, values, services and strategic intentions were developed through workshops with the FESA Executive and then through forums involving each of the divisions and a number of focus groups. Feedback was received and changes made to reflect these changes.

FESA's draft mission, vision and values are:

- *Mission:* Working together to achieve a safer community through delivery of the

highest quality of service to Western Australians through advice, emergency prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

- *Vision:* A safer community by minimising the impact of natural and man-made hazards.
- *Values:*
 - Put the community first.
 - Work together as a committed team.
 - Respect and value each other.
 - Continuously improve our services.
 - Act with integrity and honesty.
 - Have open and honest two-way communications.

The development of the FESA strategic plan, as stated previously, is one borne out of forced change. It also needs to be easily adaptable to rapidly changing circumstances. The selected planning process is one that sets a compatible direction to existing divisions yet still allows the cohesion and planned economies of scale designed in the merger of the separate organisations.

As successful planning and commitment requires the input of, among others, the internal stakeholders, this plan allows the input of its people. It is imperative that the internal stakeholders take ownership of the plan to ensure the plan is implemented and outcomes are achieved. The input of its people is also seen to be a process that needs to reflect the planning events of recent years. It is contended that the tendency for cynicism or scepticism is better treated by a less intrusive approach than previously attempted.

Underpinning our planning process will be the adoption of commonly agreed values, which is something we have already placed great emphasis on within the Fire and Rescue Service.

The present structure

The management of the two fire services has been streamlined down to regional level. Mr Bill Forbes has been appointed to the position of Executive Director of Fire Services. The Director of Operations and Regional Director positions have been advertised and appointments will be made during September. FESA will also assume responsibility for the Emergency Management Unit, which is currently under the Police Service structure.

Stakeholder management

Each organisation has a different set of internal and external stakeholders. To be successful, particularly when undertaking major reforms, stakeholders must be part of the ongoing communication and participation strategies. Throughout the establishment of FESA, our internal and external

stakeholders have been included in our strategies. Quarterly meetings with major external stakeholders have also been established, to hear their views, concerns and positive reactions to initiatives we are introducing.

To give examples of our major stakeholders they are:

- Western Australian Government
- Minister for Emergency Services
- Western Australian community
- Staff and volunteers
- Local Government authorities
- Representative unions
- Volunteer associations
- Insurance industry
- Industry interest groups (pastoralists and graziers etc.)
- Australian emergency services agencies
- Other Government departments and agencies

Legislation

Once legislation to formally establish FESA is enacted, there will be one Board comprising no more than ten persons. There are more than 20,000 volunteers in the Fire and Emergency Services organisation. Under the proposed structure, the importance of the contribution of volunteers from all the agencies to the decision-making of the new authority has been clearly recognised and will be catered for.

In addition to the Board, each of the three emergency services divisions will have a consultative committee that will include volunteer and employee representatives and the chairpersons of these consultative committees are also members of the new Board. Additional volunteer input to the decision-making of the new Authority will come from a proposed twice-yearly volunteer forum.

To provide an appropriate legislative framework for FESA's operations we have identified a legislative program that will be progressed over the next two years. As many Acts as possible will be consolidated into the same framework. These include:

- FRS funding arrangements amendments
- Review and consolidation of the Bushfires Act 1954 and the Fire Brigades Act 1942
- Emergency Management Legislation
- Volunteer Insurance Legislation
- SES establishment Legislation

Funding

The funding of the various divisions of FESA is varied and complex and is an issue that will need to be addressed to provide the organisation with greater flexibility. The most pressing issue is to resolve the inequitable method of funding the FRS permanent fire districts.

Approval has been received from Cabinet to introduce a new system of funding for the FRS based on a GRV value and collected by local government authorities. FESA is currently working with stakeholder groups to finalise the model and communications strategy. It is anticipated the new system will come into operation on 1 July 1999. This new system will provide a more flexible arrangement for funding within FESA

Reducing duplication of services and facilities

This was one of the major incentives for the establishment of FESA. The new structure involves a reduction in corporate services personnel of 6%, from 172 to 162 staff.

The Bush Fire Service headquarters has moved into FESA headquarters at 480 Hay Street, freeing-up the BFS premises at Kent Street for use by the Swan region, which was on the look-out for new premises. SES headquarters will move into FESA House in the near future. Further rationalisation of our properties is being looked at, as are collocation options to further reduce the duplication.

Salary savings from reductions in corporate services personnel of around \$0.5 million have been realised. This saving is being made available to the divisions to increase regional staff to improve service to our volunteers and communities.

Other areas that will realise savings include asset management, improved information technology, purchasing power, collocation, maintenance and rationalisation of regional services.

Leadership

The three divisions of FESA have over the years adopted differing leadership approaches. We have agreed that while different situations will call for different approaches, the predominant leadership style must be of a collaborative and participative nature. The involvement of all our people in the decision-making processes for the future is seen as a basic requirement.

In recognising the importance of leadership to our future, a leadership program has been developed in conjunction with Curtin University (a leading Western Australian tertiary institution). It is a demanding program conducted over a 3-month period. To date 55 of our management team have completed the program, with another 42 part way through. By early 1999 nearly 150 will have completed the program.

Regional alignment

The existing boundaries of the three divisions have the State of Western Australia divided into nineteen regions with little

alignment between them. This has caused disfunctional communication and coordination between the divisions, resulting in a lowering of overall service delivery to the community.

FESA has undertaken an extensive review of regional boundaries, involving widespread consultation with stakeholders. There are now seven regions in the state, with all divisional boundaries and management structure aligned across the three divisions. This has been a major change for the divisions but again has been received positively and will lead to a significant improvement in service delivery to the community.

Plans have been established and agreed for all Regional Offices of the FESA divisions to be collocated. This will be completed over the next 18 months.

Cultural differences

Culture is very important to any race or creed and to any long established group. Each of the three FESA divisions has a strong culture based on service to the community, voluntarism and, in the case of the FRS, mateship. However, as similar as they may seem from the outside, each has its own culture, and in bringing together the three cultures the acceptability and tolerance of each must be encouraged.

FESA is not out to destroy any individual culture. However, the different cultures need to be effectively linked within the new organisation. It is very important in bringing groups together to acknowledge and accept they are different and not to assume that what may be the right way for one will be the right way for all.

Identity

Commitments have been given that the divisions will retain their own identities. This ensures the local units and brigades will retain their community identity, and has gone some way in alleviating the concerns of a take-over by one of the new divisions. This does not of course prevent local units or brigades being collocated or even amalgamating into a common unit, if that is their choice.

Collocation

Since the establishment of FESA, we have advised all divisions that building projects will only be considered on a collocation basis unless there is an extremely good reason why a collocated arrangement is not feasible. This is more applicable at this point in time to country locations. However, we have commenced collocation involving regional offices within the metropolitan and country areas. There are already a number of successful projects either

completed or underway, such as Kulin, Bruce Rock, Onslow, Kalbarri, Morawa, Mundaring, Toodyay, Broome and Geraldton.

These projects include buildings, housing volunteers from the Bush Fire Service, Fire & Rescue Service, State Emergency Service and St John Ambulance and regional employees of the FESA divisions.

Information technology

Each of the three divisions had a number of systems that were different, in terms of scope, sophistication and success. There was a need for many of these systems to adopt a standardised approach or model to ensure consistency of information and a more coordinated and efficient service.

One of the important points in this process was to ensure that although there was a need for a more standardised approach, the needs and information requirements of the divisions needed to be carefully addressed. Some of these included:

- Information Technology is being significantly upgraded to meet the demands of the new agency. The Emergency Services Computer Aided Dispatch and Communications (ESCADCOM) is a major shared infrastructure project to provide call-taking and dispatch and communications for fire, rescue, police and ambulance services.
- New financial, human resources and records systems are currently being introduced to manage the activities of all divisions.
- Planning for common standards and systems for acquisition of computer facilities, networks and administrative applications is well underway.
- A joint e-mail directory has been produced and is available on-line.
- We are currently in the process of researching ways to develop new or link existing volunteer databases to enable us to develop and maintain accurate information regarding equipment, training, age and number profiles for volunteer groups.

Communication

When going through any major change process it is important to establish effective and meaningful two-way communication. Resistance to change can be reduced by effectively and honestly communicating with employees, volunteers and stakeholders to help them to see and understand why the change must occur. Strong communication reduces the risk of mis-information. Most people just want to be told what is going on. In establishing FESA, many of the internal and external stakeholders were included extensively in the

development phase and this has continued in the implementation phase. Regular newsletters and videos were circulated to staff, volunteers and external groups during this process.

Human resource management

Human resources functions for each division are now undertaken by the FESA HR section.

Existing HR staff from each of the divisions have assimilated into one to address the needs of the organisation and are currently working on their business plan.

An example of the success in this area is demonstrated in the aftermath of this year's Brookton-Pingelly major bushfires.

Both the BFS and the FRS manage their own insurance, compensation, counselling etc. when dealing with the recovery process of an incident. This was evident at this particular fire—BFS supported one town and FRS the other.

As many know, it takes months for a community to get back on its feet after a devastating bushfire, particularly when there has been the death of a local girl, four people seriously injured and around 20 volunteers requiring medical attention. This process is not helped by an uncoordinated approach in the recovery process by emergency services agencies. What we have now put in place at FESA is a coordinated approach.

Volunteers

In compiling their report and recommendations, one of the things that was uppermost in the minds of the Taskforce members was the immense contribution of volunteers. The importance and value of volunteers should never be underestimated. If volunteers were no longer available, the community and government would not be able to afford the cost of replacing their services with paid staff.

Not long after FESA was established, a dedicated officer was assigned to coordinate and advance volunteer issues across the divisions. FESA takes a close interest in the progress of volunteer issues. In May a Volunteer Forum was held to enable the volunteers from the three divisions to get together to look at issues that were common to volunteers and their future in FESA. Commitment to volunteers must be more than just words. FESA must provide adequate training, equipment and support to enable them to undertake their role in the community effectively.

Employee remuneration inequity

Currently there is inequity between the operational divisions—the BFS and SES tend to be paid at a lower level than the FRS.

This has created a great deal of debate within the three divisions. As a result, a review of the current positions and salary levels has been initiated. This resulted in the Bush Fire positions being reclassified to the same level as the FRS. In view of the change of salary and role of these positions, all will be declared vacant and advertised with selection being based on merit through a competitive selection process.

In addition, work has commenced on

developing a unified workplace agreement for all corporate staff employed by the new Authority.

Thought for the day

Like many organisations, FESA is now experiencing rapid change. This thought is very relevant to our change program:

*We must accept the things we cannot change,
Courage to change the things we can
And the wisdom to know the difference*

About the author

Bob Mitchell is the Chief Executive Officer of the newly established Fire and Emergency Services of WA (FESA).

He is a Certified Practising Accountant who has worked in the public sector for more than 27 years and has extensive experience in management.

Prior to joining the Fire & Rescue Service as Director of Business Services in 1995, he was the Director of Financial Services at the Building Management Authority, where he had worked in a range of positions since 1985.

Book review

Water in Australia: resources and management

Author: David Ingle Smith

This is not primarily a book about emergency management. It is a book about water in 'the driest inhabited continent'—its geography, its quality, its utilisation and, in the broadest sense, its politics. In short, it is a comprehensive work on water and its management in Australia.

Only a portion of it is genuinely and centrally relevant to emergency managers. This is the flood section of Chapter 5, 'Of Droughts and Flooding Rains'. Australia's largely hazard-based emergency management systems of combat agencies for particular threats have no specific place for droughts—under present thinking, this creeping hazard has to be dealt with by individual farmers who must factor in water shortages as part of normal business management. Flooding, though, is different.

As the nation's most serious natural hazard, flooding bulks large in our emergency management systems and structures. The State and Territory Emergency Services all have significant roles in relation to floods. The precise nature of those roles varies somewhat from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but all of the State and Territory Emergency Services have substantial responsibilities in relieving the pain and damage which flooding wreaks.

Being the lead agency for managing floods confers on that agency a requirement to become 'expert' in the task—which means that the various State and Territory Emergency Services must understand the flood hazard itself and how it can be managed to the

community's benefit. In turn, this should mean that the State and Territory Emergency Services will study flooding and work out in advance what can be done to alleviate the problems which it imposes. State and Territory Emergency Service people must have some knowledge of the science of flooding and the impacts floods have on communities if they are to plan their management strategies effectively. It is no longer enough to simply *react* to floods when they occur: our communities now demand a higher standard and one which incorporates real expertise.

Herein lies the potential value of Smith's book to emergency managers. It provides in readily digestible form a summary of the problem of flooding and it deals with the evolution of Australian approaches to managing the utilisation of floodplain land. Emergency managers can play a role here, but to do so they need to be able to deal credibly with others who have flood expertise—notably the hydrologists and engineers who are employed by local councils, water agencies and floodplain management consultancies. To talk to experts, it helps to have expertise yourself.

Smith does not deal directly with the myriad tasks which flooding generates when it is actually occurring—that is, tasks like warning, rescue, resupply, evacuation, property protection and information provision. Accordingly this book will inevitably be a backgrounder to State and Territory Emergency Service personnel rather a text in the management of floods: this latter work has yet to be written in an Australian context. Nevertheless key State and Territory Emergency Service people should read

Water in Australia for its insights into the nature of the costs which flooding imposes and the problems which have accompanied attempts in the various states to mitigate those costs.

The book will have a much wider audience, of course. Anyone interested in the politics of blue-green algae or the relationship between irrigation and salinisation will find much rich comment on these sensitive issues. Those interested in environmental sustainability generally or the implications of the enhanced greenhouse effect for water futures will also find material of value, as will students of water policy. The book ranges widely, and it deserves a readership of diverse interests and persuasions.

The author's views on the more controversial issues in Australian water management, incidentally, are clear. He regards our developmental history, in terms of water quality, as 'appalling', and argues that much of the Murray-Darling Basin should be retired from irrigation before the problems of land and water degradation 'become terminal'. Such opinions will be shared by many policy analysts but their acceptance by regional communities will be problematic in an age in which such communities feel assailed on all sides by what they see as unsympathetic governments and hostile policy prescriptions. There are, it seems certain, some major battles looming here.

by Chas Keys, Deputy Director General, New South Wales State Emergency Service