

FOREWORD

A New Paradigm for Anticipating Disasters

There has been a distinct shift in the fundamental way we look at natural disasters in Australia. The new paradigm moves beyond disaster response and recovery, towards anticipation and mitigation. In short, some recently announced progressive and exciting change will lead to Australians being better prepared for disasters.

On 8 June 2001, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to undertake a review of Australia's approach to the relief, recovery and mitigation against natural disasters. The objective of the Review was to determine whether current arrangements provide an effective framework to meet the needs of those impacted by natural disasters. The Review report—*Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming Mitigation, Relief and Recovery Arrangements* was released on 2 February this year.

The Review had an underlying premise that any arrangements should facilitate maximum involvement of State, Territory and Local Government in contributing to disaster relief and mitigation and also continued cost-sharing arrangements.

A High Level Group (HLG) chaired by the Secretary, Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS)—Mr Ken Matthews, was commissioned to progress the Review and I participated on behalf of Emergency Management Australia (EMA) as an adviser.

The outcomes of the Review are now the markers for the future of emergency management in this country.

The HLG concluded that current arrangements could be improved to “ensure that Australia has a world-

class national framework for natural disaster management, thereby achieving safer, more sustainable communities, and reduced risk, damage and losses”.

Central to the new approach will be a systematic and widespread national process of disaster risk assessment. This will feature a shift in focus towards cost-effective, evidence-based disaster mitigation. What is clear is that this represents an historic move beyond disaster response and reaction, towards anticipation and mitigation.

Endorsement of the reform commitments and recommendations in the report and the proposed machinery for implementation was obtained from all jurisdictions in January this year and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet has authorised the start of work to develop the reform commitments. Implementation of some of the recommendations is already underway.

Significantly, the report proposed the creation of a national group comprising high level representation from Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments to replace the previous Emergency Management Committee arrangements. This will provide broader cross-jurisdictional and whole-of-government membership. A charter for the new Australian Emergency Management Committee (AEMC) arrangements has been prepared and agreed to by all jurisdictions. The reconstituted AEMC is chaired by the Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department—Mr Robert Cornall.

A strong recommendation will see emergency management matters taken to the top decision makers. The Australasian Police Ministers Council (APMC), augmented by Emergency Services Ministers, will now consider emergency management issues. The Federal Attorney-General—the Hon Philip Ruddock MP, will chair this group of senior ministers. The AEMC will report to the augmented APMC.

There are a number of primary tasks for the new AEMC. It will oversee the implementation of the proposed disaster mitigation funding package; provide national leadership and strategic direction on emergency and natural disaster management, including national policies and priorities; and it will encourage best practice in disaster management among jurisdictions. Only substantial strategic and/or policy issues that require Ministerial consideration and endorsement will be considered by the Police and Emergency Services Ministers.

The COAG Report is a significant achievement in Australian emergency management history and it has the potential to greatly influence community safety throughout the country. The challenge confronting us all is to ensure that the reforms outlined in the report are fully implemented.

Further details of the COAG Report are provided in the article entitled *Meeting the Natural Disasters Challenge* on page 8 of this edition of the journal.

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