

FOREWORD

National Emergency Management Plan a step closer for catastrophic disasters

Tropical Cyclone Larry's category 5 impact on Northern Queensland, while not classified as nationally catastrophic, has certainly had a severe impact on the community, economy and infrastructure of the region.

In recent times, Australians have witnessed unimaginable scenes of devastation and human misery associated with the South Asian earthquake and tsunami, *Hurricane Katrina* across the southern US and the massive earthquake in Pakistan. These were the worst of the natural disasters that rocked the world this decade, not to mention the human-caused incidents we cannot forget.

Mercifully, we have not experienced such devastation on our shores. These events have however, made Australian emergency managers wonder how we would cope with such disasters if one was to occur in Australia.

These questions have been contemplated by the emergency management sector in the *Review of Australia's Ability to Respond and Recover from Catastrophic Disasters*. The review commenced in 2004 following a recommendation from the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in its report *Natural Disasters in Australia; Reforming mitigation, relief and recovery arrangements*. This review was then expanded after Boxing Day 2004 to include reference to tsunami issues.

A national working group, formed to review the COAG report, had its recommendations considered at a special meeting in April 2006, of the Augmented Australasian Police Ministers' Council in Melbourne, chaired by the Attorney-General. As a way forward, the nine Ministers with emergency management responsibilities were unanimous in urging an early finalisation of a National Emergency Management Plan.

This plan, currently being prepared by the Australian Emergency Management Committee (AEMC), would include rapid provision of fundamental necessities such as food, shelter, medical and financial services to the Australian community in the event of a catastrophic disaster. The plan would support the National Emergency Protocol as adopted by COAG on 10 February this year. For those AJEM readers who like definitions, a catastrophic disaster is one beyond any one government's ability to cope in terms of response and recovery arrangements.

In considering the report, the Ministerial Council agreed that jurisdictions should undertake further work on the agreed priorities identified from the Catastrophic Disasters Review, with the intention of enhancing Australia's emergency management capability and capacity.

All of this work is just an extension of the excellent emergency planning work already being undertaken across the emergency sector in Australia. However, I believe it will bring an entirely new perspective to attitudes about disasters that impact on our nation's wide range of communities and mark a milestone in Australia's disaster preparedness.

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