

Policy, planning, practice, politics and the COAG natural disasters review: Delivering to bushfire risk communities – a Queensland perspective

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key findings of the BTE report were that between 1967 and 1999 natural disasters (with a total cost per event over \$10 million) in Australia such as floods, bushfires, storms and tropical cyclones caused the following:

- total damage costs of \$37.8 billion (including death and injury) and average annual costs of \$1.14 billion;
- estimated average costs for a fatality of \$1.3 million, \$317,000 for a serious injury and \$10,600 for a minor injury for a total cost of \$1.4 billion and an average cost of \$41 million per year.

New South Wales accounted for 44.5 per cent of the costs, Queensland 22 per cent, Northern Territory 13.1 per cent and Victoria 8.6 per cent of total disaster costs over the period.

Table 1 – Average Annual Cost of Natural Disasters by Event 1967 to 1999 (after BTE, 2001)

Event	Average Annual Cost \$ million (1999 prices)	%
Flood	314.0	28.8
Severe storms	284.4	26.2
Cyclones	266.2	24.5
Earthquakes	144.5	13.3
Bushfires	77.2	7.1
Landslide	1.2	0.1
TOTAL	1087.5	100.0

When the costs of death and injury are included the average annual cost of natural disasters increases from \$1.0875 billion (Table 1) to \$1.14 billion. BTE warns, however, that three extreme events - Cyclone Tracy (1974), the Newcastle earthquake (1989) and the Sydney hailstorm (1999) – had strong influences on the variability of average annual costs and care must be taken when estimating the costs of future events from past events.

In the period 1967 to 1999 the BTE estimate the total cost of bushfires, causing damage greater than \$10 million, to be \$2.5 billion. Although the cost of bushfires is small (7.1%) relative to other events it is bushfi

learnt and opportunities for improvement; uneven recognition of the important role local governments have to play; lack of preparation for catastrophic disasters; limited availability of flood insurance; tendency to introduce ad hoc special relief schemes; and lack of coordinated national approach to disaster management.

COAG agreed that the Australia

What is policy?

A recommendation becomes a policy when it has been adopted and when government agencies commence the processes necessary for the policy to be implemented. Thus the COAG recommendations, commitments and the package have been accepted as policy decisions, however, in a general sense from this stage there is still a long way to go toward implementing the decisions and making the policy work (Fenna 2004).

Many people are confused by what is meant by “policy”. The term is a very general expression about beliefs, convictions or even moral instructions. Policy is not a public commitment to contribute \$40 million over four years to construction of a Townsville ring road nor is it the provision of \$80 million to meet the full cost of flood-proofing the Bruce Highway near Tully. Policy is about statements concerning beliefs, convictions, intentions or what you might promote as best practice in a particular field and the word can be used in diverse ways to apply to quite different types of statement, intention, action and inaction (Palmer & Short 2000). For example, ‘policy’ may apply to the following cases:

- general statements of commitments and objectives which can be found in the policy announcements and publications of politicians during election campaigns and can include statements such as “our policy is to support the people, communities and businesses of North Queensland”;
- the achievements of government in a particular area such as “the new Medicare Safety Net reimburses 80% of out-of-pocket expenses”;
- a specific statement of future intentions, for example, “review the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority Act to improve the performance of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, its office holders and its accountability frameworks”;
- conventions that direct action or inaction, for example, “in a region like North Queensland it will never be economically viable to have terrestrial mobile coverage everywhere” (Howard Government, 2004).

Policy development and decision making

is another way of ensuring fewer mistakes are made in a similar way that incrementalism makes smaller changes to decision-making processes. On the other hand totalitarian societies tend to try for “too much too early” and in many cases have to make subsequent repairs and adjustments. Etzioni (1976) argues that incrementalism is usually employed in pluralistic societies while rational-comprehensive decision-making or planning is favoured in totalitarian societies.

Although Anderson (cited in Palmer & Short 2000) has stated that there are three ways, and it is generally accepted in the literature that there are three ways to proceed in decision making, in fact there is now a fourth way. This fourth way is referred to as “diffusion” or “innovation” (Berry & Berry 1999) and is employed when inertia is rejected or other requirements mean that large changes to policy are needed. Research that these two policy scholars undertook in the 1990s indicates that “ultimately every government program can be traced back to some nonincremental innovation” (Berry & Berry 1999, p. 169). This does not mean the invention of policy or the development of new ideas but the adoption of programs new to the adopting entity by the emulation of programs already operating in other states, or by extension,

A model of these four processes based on Lindblom's 1979 model can be presented. It should be noted that the distances between the descriptors in the model below do not measure in any way the size of steps in policy making.

rational-

mixed-

diffusion or

Inertia and accountability

Despite the theory advanced there are fears, however, that the magnitude and complexity of the changes to policy from the COAG Review, the extensive area of changes and the relatively long time-frame may not lead to cost-effective outcomes. In the past, major programs involving long lead times and operations in areas of natural resource management have had less than satisfactory outcomes.

In December 1992, the then Prime Minister introduced a National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development which was endorsed by all levels of government. Program expenditure elements of over \$1 billion over the period from 1993 to 2002 were managed by the Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE) and Environment Australia. In a 1997 report of the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO 1997) on the Commonwealth Natural Resource Management and Environment Programs it is stated "...after some five years since the then Prime Minister's Statement on the Environment and nearly eight years into the Decade of Landcare, the Commonwealth is still unable to indicate in any detail the outcomes that have been achieved from any of the programs examined". The ANAO expressed the view that DPIE and Environment Australia had the "scope and capability to make significant improvements" (ANAO 1997, p.1) in many areas.

Bushfire policy and political impediments

It was the view of the Queensland Government that State and Territory leaders had reiterated their commitment to cooperate with the COAG Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management, however, they had expressed their displeasure at “the unilateral action of the Prime Minister in establishing a non-expert House of Representatives Inquiry to be conducted without any reference to the States and Territories” (Queensland Government, 2003b). It should be noted that at the time the Federal Government was a Liberal/National Party Coalition and the State and Territory Governments were Australian Labor Party governments.

report on the inquiry into bushfires (Commonwealth, 2003). The Chair of this inquiry, a member of the Federal Coalition, was critical that respective political leaderships of New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory who had chosen “not to contribute to the inquiry, claiming a lack of resources” but staff from many agencies from those States had attended and taken notes at the public hearings. A member of the inquiry insisted on a dissenting section in the report in which it was stated the reasons for the lack of support from some levels of

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authority to order evacuation of people irrespective of their level of preparedness and willingness to defend their property, for example, the *Disaster Management Act 2003* (Queensland Government 2003c) indicates that a police officer, a district disaster coordinator or a declared disaster officer may evacuate persons from a declared area. The media use inflammatory terms and sensationalise ideas and events which may influence people to evacuate, sometimes in non-rational ways. Campbell (2003, p.247) argues that the media provide “stories highlighting the apparent randomness of uncontrolled wild fire

Queensland Government Priorities

The current Queensland Government has established priorities to provide the following key directional statements (Queensland Government 2004) which will be subject to an enhanced focus for improvements for the period 2004 to 2007 i.e. this term of government:

1. Improving health care and strengthening services to the community;

The audit found the disaster management system had not failed in any way but recommendations were made for the State Disaster Management Group and the Department of Emergency Services concerning prioritising the COAG recommendations, strategic frameworks, consistency and monitoring of disaster management plans and development of a state-wide hazard risk profile.

The Department of Emergency Services' Corporate Plan 2003-2007, especially the key result

12. *endorse a statement of contemporary roles and responsibilities of each level of government in natural disaster management.”*

Commitments 1, 3, 7 and 12 will be a primary role for the Counter Disaster and Rescue Service (CDRS) and the regional CDRS organisations with support from the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and Department of Emergency Services (DES) Alliance, the LGAQ and the State Disaster Coordination Group.

Commitment 4 was essentially completed from a land management and planning perspective in Queensland with the introduction in June 2003 of the State Planning Policy 1/03 Mitigating the Adverse Impacts of Flood, Bushfire and Landslide (Queensland Government 2003a).

Commitments 6 and 8 will be an involvement for the DES, however, they will be substantially a responsibility for the federal Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS) and Emergency Management Australia (EMA).

Recommendation 6 - that all three levels of government agree to implement a five-year Disaster Mitigation Australia Package consisting of:

- *a new national Disaster Mitigation Programme to invest up to \$75 million per annum to put into effect the proposed commitments relating to data and research, disaster risk assessments, disaster mitigation strategies and measures, resilient infrastructure, and community awareness, education and warnings*
- *continuation of the Regional Flood Mitigation Programme at the current nationwide level of funding of \$28.8 million per annum, adjusted to keep pace with inflation, and*
- *incorporation of the \$9 million per annum currently invested nationally under the Natural Disaster Risk Management Studies Programme into the new Disaster Mitigation Programme.*

This recommendation has been completed although the amount designated in the 2003-2004 Budget was \$68.5 million and the current funding rounds are open annually until the end of the 2007-2008 financial year.

Recommendation 9 - that the guidelines for the programmes allow for:

- *the local contribution to be reduced or waived in agreed exceptional circumstances where remote Indigenous communities or low capacity Local Governments would otherwise be precluded from participating, and*
- *the cost of upgrading infrastructure to be shared on a 50:50 basis by the Commonwealth and State or Territory, or, where Local Government infrastructure is involved, on a one third basis for each level of government.*

This recommendation will be a primary role for the DOTARS, Department of Premier and Cabinet, DES, the Department of Local Government and Planning (LG&P) with involvement from CDRS and Treasury and additional operational roles for LG&P.

Recommendation 13 - that the Local Government and Planning Ministers Council require the introduction, within a time frame of one year, of arrangements to ensure natural hazards, including floodplain and bushfire management objectives, are fully considered in the land use planning legislative frameworks of all levels of government.

Recommendation 14 - that all State and Territory jurisdictions introduce statutory land use planning policies and requirements governing development in areas which are subject to a significant risk of flood, bushfire, cyclone, landslip and storm surge, within a two-year timeframe.

Recommendations 13 and 14 are essentially completed in relation to flood, bushfire and landslide following the introduction of the State Planning Policy 1/03.

Recommendation 18 - that State and Territory regulatory authorities and Local Governments have systems of building control that ensure compliance of new buildings with current disaster resistant building standards.

This recommendation is a primary role for LGA&P to review the existing building controls and with an operational role for local governments and involvement from the LGAQ/DES Alliance, the LGAQ and the SDMG.

Recommendation 22 - that States and Territories review current planning legislation to ensure that there are no barriers or disincentives to Local Government, acting in the public interest, rezoning land with high natural hazard risks to avoid inappropriate development.

This recommendation is a primary role for the LGA&P with support from DES and local governments and involvement from the SDMG

Recommendation 23 - that all levels of government promote the planning and construction of cost-effective disaster resilient infrastructure through the development of mainstreaming strategies.

This recommendation will be a primary role for the Department of State Development and Innovation (SD&I) with support from the SDMG and coordination by Department CEOs. The implementation of strategies will be a complex task with operational roles by the DES, the Department of Main Roads (DMR), the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy (DNRME), the Departments of Public Works, Health, Transport and local governments and the SDMG.

Recommendation 28 - that post-disaster assessments by relevant agencies routinely review the effectiveness of warning systems, including the degree to which the warnings resulted in intended changes in behaviour, the appropriateness of information provided, the effectiveness of warning delivery methods, and the cost benefit and cost efficiency of the warning system.

This recommendation will be a primary role for the CDRS, an operational role for the regional CDRS groups and support from the LGAQ/DES Alliance, the LGAQ and the State Disaster Coordination Group (SDCG).

Recommendation 30 - that a central element of the proposed approach to community awareness, education and warnings should be public awareness delivered at the local and community level.

This recommendation will be a primary role for the CDRS and an operational role for the CDRS regional groups.

Recommendation 40 - that post-disaster assessments be undertaken routinely after every event of significance and the findings incorporated into improved disaster management processes to deal with future events.

This recommendation will be a primary role for the CDRS, an operational role for the regional CDRS groups and support from the LGAQ/DES Alliance, the LGAQ and the SDCG.

Recommendation 41 - that arrangements put in place by governments and other parties for

- *explore the provision of concessions to emergency sector volunteers*

(d) that Local Governments

- *examine the provision of concessions such as rate rebates to emergency services sector volunteers.*

The various components of this complex recommendation will be primary roles for the Department of Communities, the CDRS, the LGAQ/DES Alliance and the LGAQ. Some of the components will be an operational role for the DES and local governments; some of the components will require support from the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS) and the Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS); some of the components will require the involvement of the SDMG, the Department of Communities and the LG&P.

Recommendation 59 - that more flexible funding arrangements, and an outreach strategy, be adopted by all levels of government to ensure that remote Indigenous communities have improved access to funding for mitigation measures. Flexible funding will be achieved through the Recommendation 9 undertaking that the local contribution for mitigation measures be reduced or waived by agreement in certain circumstances so that barriers to participation are removed.

This recommendation will be a primary role for DOTARS with support from CDRS, LG&P, LGAQ, local governments and indigenous communities and involvement from the SDMG.

It can be seen that in the short term the burden of these types of recommendations related to

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