

Emergency management and inter-agency fire management protocols

The arrangements for the management of emergencies in Australia vary from State to State, as does the management of fire in rural areas. In both instances the bottom line requirement is that partnerships be developed to ensure that all stages and levels of management are efficient and effective.

The rural fire management loop commences with the arrangements for mitigation of wildfire in rural areas, through the operational requirements of response, to the needs of recovery, linked at all points by training, community education and awareness. The arrangements for the escalation from an incident with single agency involvement to a highly complex multi-agency response required for a major emergency are also clearly defined.

The common denominator of management is that partnerships are required. Partnership protocols and relationships vary depending on the intensity of the demands of the partners and the external pressures at any point in time.

The connections needed between the community, community organisations, fire agencies and governments create a rich and constantly evolving mosaic. The linkages, couplings and connections within the partnerships must be robust and yet flexible enough to enable a seamless interaction between all partners.

What are the key elements of a partnership?

The concept of partnership is not easily defined because of the variety of elements comprising the total environment in which the partnership is bedded. In the emergency management environment relationships are required within and between agencies, the community and the various layers of government which interact with the Emergency Services.

The key requirements are role clarity, boundary definition, levels of responsibility and open communication, all of which, when defined and agreed upon should lead to increased efficiency of emergency service delivery.

What makes a good partnership?

The easy task here would be to concentrate on the non conceptual aspects of partnership and list details such as the sound understanding of:

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- legislative requirements
- key accountabilities
- role definition
- training regimes
- equipment.

However, contemporary management practices have highlighted the need to confront the conceptual elements of partnerships such as:

- shared visions
- open systems of communication
- challenging areas of perceived weakness
- adaptability
- trust.

In order to develop a robust partnership between people rather than focus on function alone.

Partnerships exhibiting the right balance of the objective and conceptual aspects will allow the personnel involved to have the authority and information to make sound decisions which will lead to high quality client service and job satisfaction.

As opposed to badly structured partnerships which are fraught with ambiguity, mistrust, limited understanding of the other partners roles and responsibilities, boundaries, borders and relationships which are not likely to be challenged.

Without clear partnership protocols, managers of local agencies must demonstrate a high tolerance for ambiguity and conflict which may only surface under the intense pressure of responding to an event. Personnel feel insecure and powerless. Partnerships with these properties easily develop cleavage planes which penetrate and weaken and may cause total disintegration.

A national overview

The complexity of the partnerships and protocols required in emergency management is illustrated by the results of a 'first cut' literature search to ascertain an estimate of the number of pieces of Australian Legislation with a reference to fire. Sixty-five matches were found using the descriptors 'fire' and Australian Legislation.

Widening the search parameters and specifying Queensland, the result was 153 documents that matched. The number is

really immaterial but serves to highlight the number of possible partnerships that may need to be created to service fire in conjunction within emergency management, both nationally and within Queensland.

Partnerships for Emergency Management were created during Federation in 1901, when the Commonwealth assigned the States and Territories the responsibility for disaster management.

Because of size, settlement patterns, vast distances, consequent isolation and demographic distribution Australia has developed a philosophy of 'self help' very early in the history of European settlement. This philosophy has stood the test of time and has been the foundation stone for the many community-based Volunteer Emergency Services which assist in the protection of our communities today.

In examining the roles of all levels of government and supporting agencies within the parameters of emergency management I was able to identify that there are separate pieces of legislation that cover the concept of 'bushfire' to a greater or lesser degree in the Australian context.

This figure alone demonstrates the need for strong partnerships and broad based understanding of the requirements of other agencies involved in the total concept of emergency management, and bushfire management in particular.

Before discussion on the way in which these partnerships might be developed and maintained it is necessary to consider the components of the horizontal layers separately.

The Commonwealth role

The Commonwealth, through Emergency Management Australia, accepts the responsibility for:

- Training in Emergency Management, and providing an Information Centre through the Australian Emergency Management Institute.
- Coordinating disaster response in support of the States and Territories, once the resource base of that state is exhausted or no longer appropriate. This is managed through Emergency Management Australia.

The Commonwealth also assists through the Natural Disaster Relief Funding

Arrangements which are made to Local Government to assist with the redevelopment of infrastructure following a disaster.

The Department of Social Security also has two forms of payment which are made available to individuals and families following disasters. These are the Special Benefit Payment and the Disaster Relief Payment.

Although it is acknowledged that bushfire prevention and mitigation are State responsibilities, the Commonwealth accepts responsibilities for the land management of Commonwealth property such as army reserves.

The Commonwealth also accepts responsibility for Bushfire Research and Communications. Communications are considered through the National Communications Advisory group.

There are also a number of Commonwealth-level Committees on which the States have representation. Most of these committees consider issues common to emergency management rather than being bushfire specific.

The State/Territory roles

As previously stated, the Australian Constitution of 1901, clearly places the responsibility for emergency management with the States and Territories. This also encompasses the mitigation of, and preparedness for wildfire as well as the arrangements to respond to and assist the community to recover from such an event.

Within each State there are various types of land tenure and numerous pieces of covering legislation which highlights once again the need for partnerships.

There are World Heritage areas, National Parks, Wildland Reserves, Forestry lands, Commercial forests, private landowners, crown lands and more. Each with a different regime that needs to be managed to reduce destructive wildfire.

Each State and Territory has a number of agencies which embrace the responsibilities for emergency management in general and bushfire management in particular.

The States/Territories require partnerships with clearly defined protocols which provide coverage and guidelines for one state acting in support of another. These protocols need to extend beyond the response phase.

A very recent example of such a partnership has been the establishment of the Northern Australia Fire Management Forum. Here the environment of the savanna grasslands of Northern Australia is the common denominator. A partnership

between the Commonwealth through the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre and the Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland State Bushfire agencies has been established to examine a range of management issues. It is early days with the protocols and partnerships still being developed. Regardless it is an excellent example of an interstate response to a common problem.

Local Government

Local Government in many States has the first line of responsibility for Emergency Management through Local Emergency Management Committees. These Committees are made up of agencies, identified in conjunction with local risk management studies.

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In many local areas the threat of wildfire is the major hazard and the partnership between fire agencies and the local government very strong. In other areas it is less so. However there is a need for local government emergency management committees to extend their arrangements beyond the most obvious and consider the uses all agencies may be put to a major emergency.

A recent Queensland example highlighted the need for the arrangements to be clearly defined. Rural fire appliances and the trained rural fire volunteers are a valuable source of manpower and equipment that can be used in support of other hazard response for example severe flooding, provided that the operational requirements are agreed to and documented in the Emergency Management Plan.

Local Government has additional responsibilities and bylaws concerning bushfire management. Many shires in Queensland now have well-developed fire manage-

ment plans for their shires.

Many towns also have incident management sub-committees, that consider the requirements for interaction of agencies which are actively involved in emergency management on a daily basis.

Loosely-coupled partnerships, on horizontal and vertical planes have always existed between the layers of government, amongst agencies and between the agencies and the communities they serve.

Because of its size, settlement patterns, vast distances, consequent isolation and demographic distribution, Australia has developed a philosophy of self-help very early in the history of European settlement. This philosophy has created strong partnerships within the local communities, which have stood the ravages of time. These groups have in many cases been the foundations stones for the local emergency services which assist in the protection of our communities today.

The need for a paradigm shift from independence to interdependence

There is a need to break old paradigms that have been the source of pseudo-security in some agencies over the years.

Some states and agencies have been fiercely independent and have retained ideas and practices that have supported an isolationist mentality, severely limiting their ability to enter into open and clearly defined partnerships.

The regulatory environment of public emergency management must inevitably have a direct impact on an organisation's management practices and internal protocols.

As large government agencies develop in maturity they may pass through a period where there is no obvious alignment of the externally imposed imperatives with the internal culture, including the agencies specific goals and strategies.

Many agencies create an aura of independence with little desire to accept new management strategies or enter into equal partnerships with other like bodies.

Often the threat of loss of power base is the cause, however it is often a lack of appreciation that there is no threat of take over just a willingness to be able service the community better in the challenging environment of the 1990s.

The concept of interdependence appears to many of this group to smack of dependence and some agencies step away into isolation rather than consider the benefits of developing partnerships and protocols based on respect for an agencies domain and at the same time developing interdependence.

This path can lead to fragmentation and the wasteful use of scarce resources both human and material.

The preferred option is to recognise the value in various types of partnerships which may comprise many linkages and couplings of equal or differing importance. These connections will vary dependent on the phase of emergency management.

Loosely structured systems are needed to underline the limits of authority. Often totally distinctive legislation is somewhat parallel and permit a degree of shared governance.

These constraints should be viewed as benefits which allow autonomy but limit organisations from drifting too far afield from the shared vision of protecting life and property. In times of emergency response these multi-organisational networks swing into action.

What is required is for the agencies to be linked in a 'cob-web' arrangement:

- the webs of agreement linking the independent functions of the agencies
- sharing of knowledge and gaining of understanding can be facilitated through inter-agency exercises, practical scenarios and information sharing activities, where borders of ownership are explored, respected and acknowledged
- this level of understanding, often requires courage to challenge the process, to enter into risk taking and to remain committed to the vision and responsibilities of the organisation, while at the same time absorbing the ethos and requirements of other organisations who may have very similar roles and responsibilities
- personnel, able to do this are able to positively function in an environment of interdependence, without losing identity or direction.

This weblike network as any other is only as strong as the weakest link and each organisation must ensure that it is able to fulfill its identified responsibilities so as to avoid becoming, 'the weak link'.

Rooted in this multilayered inter-governmental and interagency system are intense areas of strain, which cause cleavage planes to appear. This strain and susceptibility to fracture may appear on a number of axes, and may be predicated by issues which in non stress times are non issues.

The 1994, Commonwealth Government's Senate Standing Committee report on Disaster Management included a chapter on Bushfire Management which provided an early indication that a cleavage plane was developing and the problem was highlighted in point 701.1:

"The Committee is left in no doubt that some states are failing in their responsibility to take measures to protect people and property from wildfire, whether directly through protection of crown land, or indirectly through public education and support of volunteer bushfire brigades. Although local councils are made responsible for fire preparedness and suppression, they are not given sufficient resources by state governments to adequately carry out mitigation and suppression activities."

The report continued in point 7.102:
"State Governments are failing to provide sufficient resources for bushfire brigades, they are failing to adequately carry out fuel reduction burning on their own lands, and they are failing to put sufficient funding into bushfire research. It is of concern to the Committee to hear evidence that fire tenders are old and unserviceable, that petrol driven tankers have not been replaced and are still being used, that brigade members feel that they are not adequately trained and that, above all state governments are not taking full responsibility for fire prevention and suppression in nature reserves and crown lands."

Finally in point 7.103 the Report stated:
"The Committee reminds State governments that they have a clear constitutional responsibility to prepare for and respond to bushfire threats and while the Commonwealth government can and does assist, state governments must give bushfire management higher priority in their allocation of resources."

It is pleasing to report that since 1994 all States and Territories have made substantial improvements in resourcing bushfire management.

Emphasis has been placed on reinforcing the partnerships between the Commonwealth and States, between the States and with the large number of intra state agencies with a role in wildfire management.

Overcoming resistance

Consensus between agencies is the key-stone to successful partnerships.

The increasingly complex interconnectedness of the emergency management environment contains a hidden danger that the overwhelming umbrella of legislation combined with intense and varying local pressures may bring about a state of lethargy.

This state of lethargy can be equated with a 'state of learned helplessness' whereby confusion and the threat of litigation may result in inaction.

Of even greater risk is the possibility of 'exclusivity'. In this instance organisations

ignore partnerships and attempt to function in isolation. Similarly the phrase "No man is an island" applies equally to organisations. How long can organisation function in isolation once the enormous and complex demands of wildfire and emergency response begin?

Recent events overseas events, involving both natural and technological disasters have clearly illustrated that the 'all agencies approach' is the only valid method to be adopted to ensure that efficient and effective emergency management will result.

All agencies need to recognise the need for coexistence and consensus and take positive steps to reduce pressures for independence.

Summary

In summary to provide a simplistic template by which the complexity of dependencies and interdependencies could be clearly illustrated would be difficult.

It is more important that the linkages between Governments, agencies and the community be clearly identified and acknowledged by each of the partners in this complex matrix.

The challenge is to be open, to provide forums for agencies to share information and methods, to grow our personnel in knowledge, to encourage work exchanges, and to demonstrate respect for the skills and knowledge embodied in other organisations.

These aspects are the silent partners in enduring relationships.

At all stages of the emergency management continuum, the before, the during and after the event there is a need for integrated and co-ordinated partnerships which do not diminish the rights of any one organisation but strengthens the links, couplings and connections for the benefit of our mutual clients the community.

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