

# Australian support for international disasters

■ Alan Goodwin, National Resource Sharing Centre

In 2017, the province of British Columbia in Canada experienced its worst fire season in history. More than one million hectares were burnt, across hundreds of fires. The state of emergency originally declared on 7 July 2017 was extended three times.

Australia has a long history of international firefighter deployment to both the United States and Canada. In the last 12 months, Australia has modernised and reviewed its agreements for assistance with both countries. This year has been the first time the international deployment process has been managed by the National Resource Sharing Centre (NRSC).

The process for this response is managed between the NRSC, AFAC and its Commissioners and Chief Officers Strategic Committee with support from the fire and emergency service agencies. For the Canadian deployment, both Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) and the NSW Rural Fire Service (NSW RFS) have become coordinating agencies. EMV coordinate the southern states of Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia and NSW RFS coordinate NSW, the Northern Territory, ACT and Queensland.

The NRSC oversees the process, liaising with deployment leaders in Winnipeg at the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC). The NRSC embeds an Australian liaison at that office who organises the quantities of personnel needed and the skills and qualifications that are required. After receiving that information and agreeing on the arrangements required, the NRSC relies on the two coordinating agencies in NSW and Victoria to arrange the firefighters, get them prepared and get them to Sydney to depart for their deployment. The NRSC arranges the firefighters' travel to Canada, monitors the work they're doing, and investigates what further needs Australia can offer.

Australia can support the Canadians with appropriate personnel because of our similarities in a range of areas. Like Canada and the U.S., Australia operates in similar ways under an incident command system, the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System. This allows the Australian firefighters to 'fit' straight in to the Canadian fire operations. Like-for-like, an operations officer in Australia is equivalent to an operations officer in Canada. Where there have been differences in practices and terminology, the NSRC and CIFFC are able to address these through orientations or other briefings.

The value of an international deployment is significant first and foremost to those who are being assisted.

The Canadians only ask for help when they need to supplement their fire management specialists. For Australian land and fire and emergency services agencies, it is an opportune way to add value in a short timeframe.

Individual firefighters also benefit greatly, both personally and professionally. The opportunity for a firefighter to go overseas, apply their skills and knowledge, and enhance that knowledge and experience by working with different people and systems is a strong part of why so many men and women undertake an international deployment. Most adapt well and soak up that learning. When they come back to Australia they have a broader base to draw on and help them at home in their firefighting.

Domestic agencies that send personnel also benefit from the leadership skills and the different ways of thinking that their staff bring back. The flow on effects are strong in terms of leadership, experience, personal growth, knowledge and understanding.

A core consideration for agencies that deploy personnel is their own operational requirements. For example, a land management agency like Parks and Wildlife NSW or the NSW RFS have a spring burning program before the main fire season. To ensure there are enough staff based locally and that returning staff aren't tired and stressed when they return from deployments, timing and a shared approach is critical. Every state and territory has participated in sending personnel to Canada this summer. The capability and capacity of all agencies is relied on to spread the load between assisting our international counterparts and responding to domestic emergencies.

This is the first disaster where Australia has deployed international firefighters through the NRSC. On a national scale, we enhance the skills of our people, forge international partnerships that progress into training, research and management and assist our international allies in their time of need. There is a substantial logistical operation to get 230 people together, transport them to Canada, keep them working, keep them safe and bring them home. This national capability shows what we can do quickly for aid into the future; domestically and globally.