



## **PREPARING FOR EXTREME WEATHER**

Richard Williams

We need to prepare for a different type of world to combat the effects of climate change. It is akin to how government and society changes from life during peace to life during wartime. Climate change will not be as immediately devastating as war. But now is the time to plan for how business, government and society will change over the next fifty to hundred years.

The emergency management sector is at the forefront of climate impacts. Scientists predict more devastating storms, increased coastal and riverine inundation, more intense bushfires and extended periods of heat. Governments fund emergency response services to deal with business as usual. If the unusual occurs then 'surge' is initiated, often in the shape of volunteers. With really big events inter-government agreements come into play, potentially using the Australian Defence Force.

Australia's integrated emergency response system has never been truly stressed. Major catastrophes can be managed because they usually occur one at a time. If a number of catastrophes occurred at the same time the system would be severely stressed and could potentially fail. Climate change is the catalyst that could lead to concurrent major catastrophes.

Inter-government support works well in Australia through a range of agreements. SES volunteers travel interstate to fight fires, equipment and personnel are lent between states and territories and seasonal arrangements are in place to lease high capital cost items like helicopters. But will this be sufficient in a globally warming future?

Australia can capitalise on its resources to address this challenge. We have a robust industrial and business sector with tremendous capacity to provide logistical support; cohesive and well developed communities; well organised volunteer NGOs; and a strong democratic framework.

However, while a country like a sporting team can be full of stars, it is also true that a well organised team of average players will always beat a team of uncoordinated stars.

We urgently need to coordinate different sectors of our society to maximise the capacity of the country to adapt to climate change. We know this happens in times of war, but history tends to indicate that countries likely to be attacked aren't usually prepared and make the necessary social and political changes after the war starts! At least with climate change society is getting fair warning that life will gradually change.

How well would Australia respond to a set of major catastrophes happening concurrently? In the United States they talk about 'surge capacity', the ability to ramp up your resources to address different scales of event. A national understanding of 'surge capacity' and how Australia would respond to concurrent major catastrophes would position the country well.

One major threat to 'surge capacity' is demographic change which impacts on our emergency volunteer base. Aging 'baby boomers', over many years the back bone to emergency volunteering, will no longer be physically capable to help, or they will be enjoying retirement. In their place will be Generation X and Y who, according to the literature are interested in 'episodic' volunteering rather than turning up to weekly training sessions. Do we need a strategy that hits different buttons to attract the next generation to emergency volunteering? Do we need large numbers of free volunteers or will we have to adapt to smaller numbers, better trained and partially remunerated? These are issues that require attention now.

Here are some simple, low cost actions that could help build our national emergency response capacity:

- Identify which national resources need to work jointly in the event of major catastrophes. Put in place agreements on roles, responsibilities and ongoing working relationships – as a US Katrina observer said: 'it's no good exchanging business cards when the hurricane is happening'.
- Focus on 'at risk areas' to develop specific risk and response plans. Australia remains unaware of its own geography, particularly coastal digital elevation mapping and bathymetric profiling. A 'Financial Review' article pointed to the last canal development in northern NSW - who is responsible for future coastal inundation with rising sea levels?
- Harden up communities to be self reliant after major events. New Zealand runs a sophisticated public programme called 'What's the plan Stan' which is aimed at making individuals self reliant for at least 72 hours.
- Develop a national database of pre-qualified specialists who can respond to different types of events. Retired medical specialists who approached Australian organisations to help after the Boxing Day tsunami were turned away because they were an unknown quantity in terms of currency of qualification and physical fitness. Plumbers, builders and vets want to help – we can make it easier for them to participate.

With smart thinking we can come up with a range of initiatives to prepared Australia for the consequences of climate change. Time is still on our side to get this work underway but it requires a national approach and leadership.