



South Australian  
**Country  
Fire Service**

cfs.sa.gov.au

Our Reference: \_\_\_\_\_

Enquiries: Chief Officer  
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21 February 2023

Mr Mark Fitt  
Committee Secretary  
Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience  
By email: [disasterresilience.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:disasterresilience.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Mr Fitt

The South Australian Country Fire Service (SACFS) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience inquiry into Australia's preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, as well as alternative models to disaster recovery.

The SACFS is South Australia's largest volunteer-based organisation, providing an emergency service dedicated to protecting life, property, and environmental assets in outer metropolitan, semi-urban, regional, and rural areas of South Australia.

Please find attached the SACFS submission for the Committee's consideration and if any further explanation and discussion is required we are available for attendance at any of the committee's hearings.

Yours sincerely

**Brett Loughlin AFSM**  
Chief Officer



# Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

21 February 2023

## Introduction

The SACFS consists of approximately 190 full-time equivalent employees, and approximately 13,500 volunteers (firefighters, cadets, operational support) providing a range of fire and emergency services to communities across South Australia. The extraordinary contribution of our volunteers is vital in ensuring the sustainability and delivery of fire and emergency services to the communities.

Australia's changing climate, increasing exposure to natural hazards and increasing expectations of the role of Government in managing emergencies is placing higher levels of expectation on SACFS and other emergency services to protect communities and manage major emergencies and disasters.

The SACFS submission focuses on the following components of the Terms of Reference:

- the role of the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters;
- the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters, due to climate change, on the ongoing capacity and capability of the Australian Defence Force; and
- the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability.

## Context

SACFS is not defined by bushfire alone, but on a daily basis also responds to vehicle related incidents, structural fires, and hazardous material threats.

In addition to our local focus, the SACFS also works with other jurisdictions on developing consistencies in operations and support capabilities. This collaboration includes our Pacific partners as well as our Australian State and Territory colleagues.

Climate change has seen the need for emergency services to plan for larger and more frequent natural disasters that are not limited by borders. These events have also seen the introduction of the Safer Pacific Communities Program, and in 2016 the SACFS was approached to mentor the development of a fire and emergency service for the Republic of Kiribati.

SACFS has supplied four fire trucks and firefighting equipment, VHF radios, smart phones and laptop computers for use within the Kiribati Emergency Operations Centre. SACFS has trained 50 of Kiribati's Government personnel and fully kitted them out with firefighting personal protective clothing.

SACFS receives targeted Commonwealth funding for the implementation and management of the Australian Fire Danger Rating System and access to aerial firefighting resources through the National Aerial Firefighting Centre. However, SACFS does not receive any Commonwealth financial support for its national and international activities.

A national fund designed to support emergency management capability development, with funding awarded under criteria that promote national capability and interoperability, could utilise extant arrangements to encourage consistency and disaster resilient development.

### **Fire and Emergency Services capacity and capability**

Fire and Emergency Services rely heavily on the support of other bodies during major events, including interstate counterparts, state forestry and parks agencies, the forestry and timber industry, NFPs, primary producers, and Australian Defence Force (ADF). Many of these bodies primarily assist in the protection of the assets they own or manage, while others contribute to broader incident management.

Increased capacity and capability is needed for fire and emergency services to cope with worsening disasters and empower communities to remain resilient in the event of natural disasters. An increase in full-time staff to manage longer more frequent incidents and volunteers will enable fire and emergency services not only build capacity and capability to deal with more intense natural disasters but will also establish a standing capability to initiate and manage the transition to disaster recovery efforts.

Without building this capability, fire and emergency services will be looking to have ADF support fires and major disasters much quicker than the

current activation timeframes as an alternate to state-based solutions. At the least, any rapid activation of the ADF will require planning to occur in real time rather than a number of days.

### **Role of the Australian Defence Force in domestic natural disasters**

Although not directly involved in firefighting, the ADF is well placed to provide logistic support. In recent years, ADF has provided RAAF facility support in SA support at RAAF Edinburgh.

It cost the Australian Government approximately \$68.6M for the ADF to provide assistance during the 2019-2020 bushfires<sup>1</sup>.

SACFS welcomes the ADF being involved in events such as the 2019-2020 bushfires, however knowing ADF resources are finite, more can be done to define the role and extent of the ADF involvement.

The provision of logistical support by the ADF will always be welcome by the SACFS, but becoming involved directly on the fireground is not supported without the appropriate skillset, as it will only put ADF personnel and SACFS firefighters at risk. It would also create a perception the ADF was duplicating or taking over the role of that of the SACFS volunteers, which would be received poorly by the public and would further compound efforts to attract and retain firefighting volunteers.

The ADF skill set is ideally positioned to provide logistical support in providing accommodation, facilities, catering, transport, engineering support, and evacuating people when necessary. This level of support would usually be critical and likely limited to major events, such as the 2019-2020 bushfires.

Emergency response is a high-risk, high-consequence activity and our view is that the statutory fire and emergency services are the appropriate entities to manage response activities.

### **Climate change – more frequent and more intense natural disasters**

South Australia's changing climate, increasing exposure to natural hazards and increasing expectations of the role of Government in managing emergencies is placing higher levels of expectation on SACFS to protect communities and manage major emergencies and disasters. Incidents are classified into 3 levels, with level 1 incidents being managed at the local level through to Level 3 Incidents requiring intervention of highly trained and skilled Incident Management teams. Level 3 activations are for the most complex and potentially damaging incidents and in the past ten years, SACFS had had eight Level 3 Incident declarations, the highest level of incident complexity and community impact. Four of these have come in the past three fire seasons, a trend which is expected to increase.

If the SACFS is to meet these increasing expectations with finite resources the role of ADF providing logistical support in Level 3 incidents will enable a professional and efficient emergency response through the use of the unique skill sets of each of the organisations.

**Impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on ongoing capacity and capability.**

The increased impact expected in the future will critically require greater local involvement in building resilience, social connectivity and even contributing to the value of mental health in the community through long lasting community connections.

Too often a community will feel let down when left to 'pick up the pieces' or parts of the community are supported to get back on their feet, with others not as deployments of external bodies cease.

For the SACFS to contribute to these future demands, and in the process delineating the scope of ADF in domestic natural disasters, support from the Australian Government for our work with our Pacific partners as well as our Australian State and Territory colleagues will provide an opportunity for us to redirect resources in building our local capacity and capability.

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<sup>i</sup> (The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, 2020)