

**The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign
Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) –
Defence Subcommittee**

**Inquiry into the Department of Defence Annual
Report 2021–22**

Disaster Relief Australia Submission

June 2023

22 June 2023

Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Please consider our submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's inquiry into the *Department of Defence Annual Report 2021-22*.

Background

The 2020 Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements identified that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has finite capacity and capability. While the ADF is proactively postured to support the response to domestic disaster relief, the unprecedented scale, duration and frequency of support is unsustainable without accepting significant impacts to ADF preparedness for its primary role. The enduring requirement for Defence in responding to more frequent and intense domestic disasters impacts its capacity to conduct specific training, exercises or deployments.

Continuous and concurrent disasters are unfortunately becoming an increasingly common feature in Australia has had more frequent environmental events (such as bushfires and floods), in addition to other challenges such as the COVID pandemic. Increasingly, the ADF is utilised as a sustained force in disaster response. As a result, the ADF workforce has experienced a shift from solely national defence to an increased focus on aid and disaster relief. As evidenced in the Department of Defence submission the Inquiry into the Defence Annual Report 2021-22, "the continued use of Defence personnel in domestic disaster relief operations is a [negative] contributing factor to workforce **satisfaction**. Defence is experiencing reduced retention and recruiting levels increasing pressure on ADF workforce availability".

The Defence Submission to the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience identifies that the establishment of a deployable contingency workforce to support national crisis response and recovery could provide an alternative option to utilising the ADF workforce. DRA offers an opportunity to work in partnership with Defence to provide such a workforce. The benefits of the DRA model are twofold. The first is that it will alleviate the impacts to ADF preparedness. The second is that it will provide an additional benefit to Defence by engaging ADF personnel in a civilian organisation ahead of discharge, thereby assisting them with their transition from ADF service.

Disaster Relief Australia (DRA) has a history of successfully working alongside the ADF in disaster-affected areas. We seek to create a disaster relief workforce made up of serving members of the ADF on leave, transitioning members of the ADF, Defence employees, veterans and first responders. Coupled with a proven capability to manage spontaneous (community) volunteers, DRA provides an alternative civil workforce to Defence deployment in disaster relief.

DRA's mission is to unite the skills and experience of military veterans with emergency services specialists to rapidly deploy disaster relief teams in Australia and around the world in the wake of natural disasters. By preparing for and responding to disasters, DRA provides military veterans the opportunity to grow beyond their military service. Disaster relief has proven to be a powerful tool to help veterans transition back into society and their local communities.

DRA has proven that veterans have unique skills and experience that can be harnessed to assist disaster affected communities. Since 2017, DRA has deployed on 56 disaster relief and recovery missions both in Australia and around the world, and maintains over 2500 volunteers in nine Disaster Relief Teams (DRTs) across Australia.

DRA works predominantly in disaster resilience and recovery and provides the following capabilities:

- General duties disaster recovery work
- Incident management
- Damage and impact assessment
- Aerial damage assessment and mapping
- Debris management and access restoration
- Logistics management and aid delivery
- Spontaneous volunteer management
- Work order management
- Expedient home repairs
- Building community resilience and capacity

DRA is establishing a scalable and deployable civil contingency workforce to support national crisis response and recovery, to provide support to disaster affected communities. DRA is able to provide communities with a workforce that is clearly distinguishable, well trained and identifiable as a Non-Government Organisation (NGO). The footprint of DRA across all states and territories means it is well placed to activate recovery operations across the country.

Recommendations

DRA is well placed to be the force of choice for the government in disaster recovery, with the capability to displace reliance on the ADF as circumstances permit. To assist in building the capacity and capability of DRA to so the following recommendations are made.

ADF personnel released on leave to volunteer with DRA

The ADF create a leave provision to allow ADF personnel to deploy with DRA. DRA's current practice is to deploy individuals for no longer than one week at a time. ADF members could apply for leave at times where their absence will not diminish their unit's capability. ADF personnel should be encouraged by their Commanding Officers and Defence leadership to take up leave to participate in DRA activities as appropriate.

DRA as an ADF personnel transition partner

ADF personnel transitioning from full time service should be encouraged to join DRA as a model of continued service. As a veteran led organisation, DRA provides an environment where veterans find continued purpose and identity through disaster relief. Positive interactions from volunteering have been proven to mimic the protective factors of ADF service and advance veteran wellbeing. This significantly enhances the transition process.

DRA as a partner to Defence in disaster relief field operations

DRA to be an approved partner to the ADF to facilitate interoperability between ADF units and DRA during times of disaster. This will enhance the ability of both the ADF and DRA to work closely together, such as through shared data and communication arrangements. It will also allow ADF commanders to incorporate DRA into their handover and withdrawal planning during the early stages of mission planning, reducing the time the ADF must remain deployed on disaster recovery operations.

DRA and the ADF have a proven record of working together in disaster affected communities. Commonalities in language, process, and culture enhance our capability to integrate during field operations. For example, following the Northern Rivers Flooding in 2022, DRA and the ADF worked hand in glove in and around the towns of Lismore and Coraki to collect, share, and act on intelligence to assist community member in need.

DRA to become a recognised Emergency Management Agency

Inclusion of DRA in the Commonwealth Disaster (COMDIS) Plan as a recognised Emergency Management Agency will be a key enabler for DRA to sustain operations in the field. Critically, it will allow Australian Public Service (APS) employees to access volunteering leave to deploy with DRA in a similar manner to members of the SES & RFS.

Conclusion

The above recommendations provide a pathway to ensuring the ADF can focus on its primary role of defending Australia. With some assistance DRA can provide a robust civil contingency capability that can assist communities in disaster recovery without the need for ADF support, except in the most extreme emergencies, as recommended in the Defence Strategic Review.



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