

Council of Australian Governments' Meeting

EXCERPT FROM COMMUNIQUÉ

Brisbane, 7 December 2009

NATIONAL SECURITY AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

Briefing from the National Security Adviser

Mr Duncan Lewis, AO, the National Security Adviser, briefed COAG on Australia's national security arrangements.

Natural disaster arrangements

Following decisions at its 30 April 2009 meeting, COAG agreed to a range of measures to improve Australia's natural disaster arrangements. Given the expected increased regularity and severity of natural disasters arising from extreme weather events, governments recognise that a national, coordinated and cooperative effort is required to strengthen Australia's capacity to withstand and recover from emergencies and disasters. COAG therefore agreed to a new whole-of-nation, 'resilience' based approach to natural disaster policy and programs, which recognises that a disaster resilient community is one that works together to understand and manage the risks that it confronts. The National Disaster Resilience Statement can be found at Attachment C (see next page).

Governments, at all levels, have a significant role to play in strengthening the nation's resilience to disasters. To this end, COAG agreed to a range of measures to improve Australia's natural disaster arrangements through more efficient and effective funding arrangements for natural disaster mitigation, relief and recovery; strengthened coordination and partnership between the Commonwealth and State governments in preparation for, and in response to, disasters; and the introduction of a framework for improving the interoperability of radio-communications equipment used by emergency services.

COAG also noted recent actions taken by the Commonwealth and State governments to improve national capabilities for responding to disasters. At its 30 April 2009 meeting, COAG agreed to develop a national telephone-based emergency warning system and COAG today noted that this system – known as Emergency Alert – is being rolled out. It will provide emergency service agencies another tool with which to warn and advise the public in the event of emergencies. COAG

also welcomed implementation of national emergency call centre surge capacity arrangements, under which the Commonwealth will provide a surge capability to the States should their local emergency call centre capacity be overwhelmed following a disaster.

Critical infrastructure protection

Critical infrastructure is essential to Australia's national security, economic prosperity and social well-being. COAG noted that the effective protection of critical infrastructure is reliant on a strong, collaborative partnership between governments and critical infrastructure owners and operators.

COAG noted that there are areas of common government responsibility where critical infrastructure activities need to be closely co-ordinated. To help achieve this improved co-ordination, COAG agreed to create a new committee, the National Critical Infrastructure Resilience Committee, both as a national co-ordination mechanism for critical infrastructure resilience, as well as to enhance and replace existing co-ordination mechanisms.

The National Critical Infrastructure Resilience Committee will develop working relationships with relevant Ministerial Councils and Committees, and undertake further work in relation to the roles and responsibilities of respective governments as they relate to the concept of 'critical infrastructure resilience.'

National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic

COAG noted that updates have been made to the *National Action Plan for Human Influenza Pandemic* and associated documents that reflect contemporary experience with the H1N1 pandemic in 2009.

ATTACHMENT C NATIONAL DISASTER RESILIENCE STATEMENT

Introduction

Australia has recently experienced a number of large scale and devastating natural disasters, including catastrophic bushfires, far reaching floods, and damaging storms. Natural disasters are a feature of the Australian climate and landscape and this threat will continue, not least because climate change is making weather patterns less predictable and more extreme. Such events can have personal, social, economic and environmental impacts that take many years to dissipate.

Australia has and continues to cope well with natural disasters, through well established and cooperative emergency management arrangements, effective capabilities, and dedicated professional and volunteer personnel. Australians are also renowned for their resilience to hardship, including the ability to innovate and adapt, a strong community spirit that supports those in need and the self-reliance to withstand and recover from disasters.

A collective responsibility for resilience

Given the increasing regularity and severity of natural disasters, Australian Governments have recognised that a national, coordinated and cooperative effort is required to enhance Australia's capacity to withstand and recover from emergencies and disasters. A disaster resilient community is one that works together to understand and manage the risks that it confronts. Disaster resilience is the collective responsibility of all sectors of society, including all levels of government, business, the non-government sector and individuals. If all these sectors work together with a united focus and a shared sense of responsibility to improve disaster resilience, they will be far more effective than the individual efforts of any one sector.

Role of government

Governments, at all levels, have a significant role in strengthening the nation's resilience to disasters by:

- developing and implementing effective, risk-based land management and planning arrangements and other mitigation activities;
- having effective arrangements in place to inform people about how to assess risks and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to hazards;
- having clear and effective education systems so people understand what options are available and what the best course of action is in responding to a hazard as it approaches;
- supporting individuals and communities to prepare for extreme events;
- ensuring the most effective, well-coordinated response from our emergency services and volunteers when disaster hits; and
- working in a swift, compassionate and pragmatic way to help communities recover from devastation and to learn, innovate and adapt in the aftermath of disastrous events.

Australian governments are working collectively to incorporate the principle of disaster resilience into aspects of natural disaster arrangements, including preventing, preparing, responding to, and recovering from, disasters.

National disaster resilience strategy

The efforts of governments will be assisted by the establishment of a new National Emergency Management Committee that will include experts from Commonwealth, State and Territory and Local governments and report to COAG and relevant ministerial councils. The first task of this committee will be to bring together the representative views of all governments, business, non-government sector and the community into a comprehensive National Disaster Resilience Strategy. This group will also be tasked with considering further those lessons arising from the recent bushfires and floods that could benefit from national collaboration.

Role of business

COAG acknowledges that businesses can and do play a fundamental role in supporting a community's resilience to disasters. They provide resources, expertise and many essential services on which the community depends. Businesses, including critical infrastructure providers, make a contribution by understanding the risks that they face and ensuring that they are able to continue providing services during or soon after a disaster.

Role of individuals

Disaster resilience is based on individuals taking their share of responsibility for preventing, preparing for, responding to and recovering from disasters. They can do this by drawing on guidance, resources and policies of government and other sources such as community organisations. The disaster resilience of people and households is significantly increased by active planning and preparation for protecting life and property, based on an awareness of the threats relevant to their locality. It is also increased by knowing and being involved in local community disaster or emergency management arrangements, and for many being involved as a volunteer.

Role of non-government organisations and volunteers

Non-government and community organisations are at the forefront of strengthening disaster resilience in Australia. It is to them that Australians often turn for support or advice and the dedicated work of these agencies and organisations is critical to helping communities to cope with, and recover from, a disaster. Australian governments will continue to partner with these agencies and organisations to spread the disaster resilience message and to find practical ways to strengthen disaster resilience in the communities they serve.

Strengthening Australia's disaster resilience is not a stand-alone activity that can be achieved in a set time-frame, nor can it be achieved without a joint commitment and concerted effort by all sectors of society.

But it is an effort that is worth making, because building a more disaster resilient nation is an investment in our future.