

# The benefits of sharing emergency response resources

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When emergency strikes it can sometimes overwhelm local emergency services organisations. An extreme event might quickly consume the available resources, leaving responders with less than they need to manage the situation.

In a large-scale emergency, where there is demand across the country that exceeds the resources of a state or local jurisdiction, it is important to be able to access the resources of other jurisdictions as well as a national, centralised fleet of equipment. This was a recommendation in the *Independent Review into South Australia's 2019-20 Bushfire Season*<sup>1</sup> (Recommendation 7).

This article discusses the financial benefits and efficiencies of sharing emergency services resources during times of crisis, with a focus on Australian examples.

## Cost savings

Australian states and territories are projected to spend more than \$1.5 billion (combined from state and territory budget statements 2021–22) on emergency service preparedness and response annually in the coming years. The Australian Government has established the Disaster Ready Fund that will provide up to \$1 billion over the coming 5 years to help communities improve preparedness for their localised high-risk hazards. This is in addition to the \$213 million cost to the Australian Government over 2019 to 2022 in activating the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to assist in disaster responses. This reliance needs to be reviewed in the coming years.

The Australian Government's recent Defence Strategic Review 2023<sup>2</sup> recommended the ADF work with states and territories to develop 'national resilience and response measures for adverse climate change ... without the need of ADF support except in the most extreme emergencies'. The review points out that the ADF should be the 'force of last resort' for domestic aid except in extreme circumstances.

There is also a role for the private sector to provide expertise and savings. Companies like Humanihut<sup>3</sup> can be an effective and financially efficient way to supply and maintain extra resources. Instead of every jurisdiction maintaining a capability for every eventuality, which is wasteful if not needed or properly used, a commercial organisation can provide a surge capacity in the form of infrastructure and personnel as and when it is needed.

## Improved response times

One of the most significant benefits of sharing emergency services resources is the decreased response times. In Australia, response times can vary depending on the location. Rural and remote areas often face challenges due to limited resources and long distances. By sharing resources, emergency responders can arrive at the scene faster and provide essential services sooner.

For example, in Western Australia, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services has a resource-sharing program called Quick Response Teams. These teams consist of firefighters who can travel to areas experiencing bushfires or other emergencies. By sharing resources between different regions the department can mobilise teams promptly, thus reducing response times and potentially saving lives.

## Increased availability of specialised equipment

During emergencies, specialised equipment such as ambulances, fire trucks and rescue vehicles might reach their operational capacity. By sharing resources, emergency responders can access specialised equipment that may not be available



Portable shower, toilets and accommodation were set up in Barmera to provide temporary accommodation for local residents displaced by flooding.

Image: Neale Sutton

locally. This is particularly relevant in Australia, where events like bushfires, floods and cyclones frequently occur and can put a strain on emergency services organisations.

The bushfires in Victoria in 2009 are a prime example. The bushfires resulted in devastating loss of life and property. During the response, neighbouring states of New South Wales and South Australia, shared their firefighting aircraft and personnel. This collaborative effort significantly increased the access to aerial firefighting resources and enabled an effective allocation of resources to the bushfires.

Also, in 2022, portable showers, toilets and accommodation facilities were set up in Deniliquin, New South Wales, to accommodate the NSW Rural Fire Service that were on the ground in response to the flooding in the region. Humanihut could quickly supply and set-up the facilities used by the teams to support the shared response during the floods.

Another example was in December 2022, when, at the request of the South Australian Government Department of Housing, Humanihut moved infrastructure to the Riverland town of Barmera, to provide temporary accommodation for local residents displaced by flooding of the Murray River.

## Improved coordination

Sharing emergency response resources can also improve coordination between emergency services agencies. During an emergency, multiple agencies may need to work together to provide a consolidated response. By sharing resources, agencies can work efficiently. This coordination is crucial for seamless emergency response operations.

In Australia, the National Resource Sharing Centre<sup>4</sup> (NRSC) is a central hub for coordinating the sharing of resources during emergencies. The NRSC plays a communication and coordination role that enables emergency services agencies across the country to share information and resources in real-time. This streamlined approach enhances the coordination for responding agencies.

## Increased capacity

Sharing resources can also increase the overall capacity of the emergency response. By sharing resources, emergency services agencies can increase their capacity and potentially improve their capability to respond. This is particularly important during large-scale events where multiple emergencies may be occurring simultaneously.

The floods that affected South East Queensland and New South Wales in 2011 highlight the need for increased capacity through resource sharing. Emergency services agencies from Victoria and South Australia deployed personnel, equipment and resources to assist in the response and recovery efforts. This collaboration increased the overall capacity of localised emergency services agencies to deal with the widespread flooding and to provide aid to affected communities.

## Collaborative training and knowledge sharing

Sharing resources also facilitates collaborative training and sharing of knowledge. When emergency services agencies share resources, they can also exchange valuable expertise and practices. This collaboration builds a collective knowledge and skills base of emergency responders. This can improve effective and efficient response efforts.

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority<sup>5</sup> has established a Joint Rescue Coordination Centre<sup>6</sup> that coordinates search and rescue operations across Australia's vast maritime areas. Through the centre, different emergency services agencies share resources, conduct joint training exercises and exchange knowledge on maritime emergency response. This shared training and knowledge provides a coordinated response to Australia's maritime incidents.

## Community resilience and support

Sharing resources fosters community resilience and support. When neighbouring regions or states assist each other it sends a powerful message of solidarity and support to affected communities. This support can strengthen community morale and may help to alleviate the burden on local emergency services personnel.

In the aftermath of the bushfires that ravaged parts of New South Wales in the summer of 2019–20, emergency services agencies from various states as well as the Australian Capital Territory joined forces to provide assistance. Firefighters, paramedics and emergency-trained volunteers travelled from other regions to support the affected communities. This collaboration provided essential resources and capacity and brought hope and comfort to local communities.

## Role of the private sector

Private sector organisations are being called on and should be used as part of emergency response situations. Their resources and expertise provide additional support and bring additional (and sometimes specialised) infrastructure and skills to the response and recovery.

The Global Development Research Centre<sup>7</sup> provides 4 areas where the private sector can contribute in emergency management. These are resource mobilisation, infrastructure and logistics, expertise and technology and preparedness planning.

There is significant knowledge and resources in the private sector that is ready and available that can provide a surge capacity when

required. Many of these organisations have ex-personnel from within emergency services organisations who can contribute their knowledge and experience.

## Conclusion

In the Australian context, sharing emergency services resources is highly beneficial. It can reduce response times, increase the availability of specialised equipment, can save costs, enhances coordination, increases overall capacity, promotes collaborative training and knowledge sharing and can foster community resilience and support.

Bringing in private sector organisations that can support emergency management operations allows emergency services responders to focus on their role and resourcing. The added benefit comes from having access to surge capacity from private sectors organisations.

Examples from Australia demonstrate the positive effect of resource sharing, whether it be through quick-response teams, sharing accommodation, optimising ambulance allocation, coordinating resources through a centralised platform or undertaking joint training exercises. The private sector can, and should, provide their specialist infrastructure and skills to help manage the financial consequences of preparedness, response and recovery.

Australia's emergency management sector and its partners will continue to develop and strengthen resource sharing. This can enhance its collective ability to respond effectively to reduce risks and respond to emergencies that threaten communities.

## Endnotes

1. Government of South Australia 2020, *Independent Review into South Australia's 2019-20 Bushfire Season*. At: <https://safecom-files-v8.s3.amazonaws.com/current/docs/Independent%20Review%20into%20SA%2527s%25202019-20%2520Bushfire%2520Season%2520-%2520Web%2520Upload.pdf>.
2. Defence Strategic Review 2023, at [www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review](http://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review).
3. Humanhut website, at [www.humanihut.com](http://www.humanihut.com).
4. National Resource Sharing Centre, at [www.afac.com.au/initiative/nrsc](http://www.afac.com.au/initiative/nrsc).
5. Australian Maritime Safety Authority, at [www.amsa.gov.au](http://www.amsa.gov.au).
6. AMSA Joint Rescue Coordination Centre, at [www.amsa.gov.au/amsa-joint-rescue-coordination-centre](http://www.amsa.gov.au/amsa-joint-rescue-coordination-centre).
7. Global Development Research Centre, at [www.gdrc.org](http://www.gdrc.org).