



Rescuing Emergency Services



Canberra**liberals**

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The Canberra Liberals will strengthen our emergency services to more effectively protect the ACT community against disaster. The Canberra Liberals will anticipate and mitigate disaster threats by ensuring high quality Emergency Services backed up by an efficient Emergency Management system.

The Canberra Liberals' Key Commitments

The key Canberra Liberal commitments are as follows.

Capability

- Expand the network of community fire units by forming and funding an additional 25 units.

Planning

- Protect the urban area against the primary risk of urban disasters and emergencies by strengthening resilience and continuity planning.

Organisational Arrangements

- Restructure the Emergency Services Agency (ESA) as an independent authority and improve responsiveness by streamlining the chain of command between the Minister and front line agencies, including re-introducing dedicated Chief Officers with increased powers for the four emergency services.

The Stanhope Legacy

After the 2003 bushfire disaster when the Stanhope Government chose to give insufficient warning and protection to the ACT community, the ACT Government belatedly increased the ACT Emergency Services budget. But many lessons learned in the 2003 disaster have not been effectively applied and key Mcleod Inquiry recommendations have not been implemented.

The Doogan Coronial Inquiry into the 2003 disaster has been savagely attacked by the Chief Minister and key Doogan findings, specific to the failure to adequately warn the community, have been ignored.

Preventative planning for the most strategic risks - bushfire risk and urban centre terrorist attack risks - has been very patchy. Years after both urgent risks were identified much of what was needed is still incomplete. The Strategic Bushfire Management Plan still lacks clarity and authority to provide the planning and

prevention platform against which all activities must be measured. Little public information has been made available to the community about strategic preventative planning, agency responsibilities and citizen responsibilities.

The worthwhile efforts to introduce community fire units petered out due to a lack of resourcing and many areas that had attracted resident interest in establishing units were left unserved.

The ACT Government undertook in 2006 the retrograde step of scrapping the independence and responsiveness of the Emergency Services Authority. The organisational structure of emergency services was unnecessary complicated and the reporting line to the Minister was diverted through the Department of Justice and Community Safety. The decision to do so was bureaucratic in the extreme, was aimed at clipping the wings of the emergency professionals and has deeply and widely angered the emergency services volunteers and permanent officers and workers.

Evidence given in the ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into Emergency Services was strongly critical of poor management and the intimidation and bullying used to constrain staff from responding. The disgust of the Rural Fire Services units with the government and senior bureaucrats resulted in an unprecedented strike in March 2007 and the mistrust and anger lingers to this day.

Reforms to Strengthen Emergency Response

The Liberal approach will have a focus on planning and preparedness.

Community education and awareness raising is important in critical incident management and community involvement has also proved to be effective.

In rural areas volunteer bushfire brigades actually comprise the key resource base for fire prevention and protection. Some **community fire units** were introduced in the ACT in 2004. Increasingly these are being extended into urban areas through the community fire units that can assist with:

- fire fighting;
- community education and awareness;
- neighbourhood control; and
- evacuation events.

Additional resources will be committed to improving community education and the establishment of 25 additional community fire units.

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
Community Fire Units – Replacement of Equipment and ongoing training needs		110	275	284
Community Fire Units – Equipment and protective clothing for 25 units		625		

The **Strategic Bushfire Management Plan** established in 2004 will be reviewed to improve its clarity and authority. All agencies with land management responsibilities will be required to contribute appropriately to the Plan and to refine or develop their own Bushfire Action Plans. Associated planning processes that deal with critical incident risks and impacts management will be strengthened.

Emergency planning activities based on the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan and local Bushfire Action Plans already have adequate budget allocations, so no additional resource demands are anticipated. Prioritisation and reallocation of existing resources will be required before additional resources are considered for these activities.

Rural lessees will be assisted with the development and implementation of land management plans for their properties.

The authority of the **Bushfire Council** will be enhanced to advise the Minister and the ESA in all aspects of bushfire planning and performance standards.

Implementation activities for the findings and recommendations of the **McLeod Inquiry and Doogan Reports** will be given priority. Fire prevention and protection capability by **ACT government land managers** will be reviewed.

The Canberra Liberals will return to the organisational structure for emergency services which has been proven in other jurisdictions over many years to effectively support operational performance and internal and external communications. This will involve the creation of an **independent and autonomous Emergency Services Authority** with a Commissioner reporting directly to the Minister.

Dedicated Chief Officer positions will be established to head the four emergency services operational units – Rural Fire Service, Fire Brigade, Ambulance Service and State Emergency Service. This will reduce the layers in the chain of command between the operational emergency workers and the Minister from 6 to 3 and improve the ability of key people at the coalface to contribute their ideas and suggestions and highlight operational issues.

There is a duplication of senior resources between Planning, Risk and Projects activities under the two deputies and under the heads of the services, which would be progressively merged, to fund the upgrade of the Chief positions. Some reclassifications of existing positions may be necessary to give effect to the new, flatter structure. Currently, some of the former operational service Chief Officers remain within the organisation, so their classification and remuneration will be equivalent to their former levels.

Management of the Authority is proposed to be directed by a Management Board, comprising the Commissioner and the four operational Service Chief Officers, with advisory input from the Bushfire Council. No additional governance costs are forecast.

This flatter management structure will go a long way towards addressing the concerns of key emergency service staff and volunteers about poor and inefficient management practices.

Background: Arrangements Interstate

It is not unusual for the separate emergency agencies to have individual Chief Officers.

New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland have separate organisational units for their Rural Fire Services, Metropolitan Fire Brigades, Ambulance Services and State Emergency Services, headed by a Commissioner or equivalent officer. They in turn report to a Minister, mostly the Minister responsible for Emergency Services in their jurisdiction.

The Queensland arrangement for fire services varies from that model by combining rural and metropolitan services in one organisational unit and Queensland also has all the organisational units under one State department so their emergency service Commissioners report to the minister through a Director General.

The Victorian model has the separate units reporting through administrative Boards to their Minister. The NSW and Victorian arrangements also both differ in having the ambulance services responsible to the Minister for Health rather than the Minister for Emergency Services.