ISSUES, PRIORITIES, DIRECTIONS

WORKPLACE

HEALTH

AND SAFETY

A STATEMENT ON RESEARCH PRIORITIES FOR
NATURAL HAZARDS EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

Emergency management is premised on the principle of a comprehensive and integrated approach, commonly referred to as the 'all hazards-all agencies' model of emergency management. Based on this principle it is expected that the systems that have been developed within jurisdictions can be adapted to any incident confronting the community, regardless of its nature.

Work health and safety in the emergency services ensures resilience in the workforce is supported to conduct activities, before, during and after emergencies. This includes, identifying challenges and using work, health and safety legislation and regulation and process to create safe workplaces and actively encouraging diversity in the workforce.

A changing climate has brought changes to the frequency, duration and intensity of bushfires, cyclones and floods, as well as other severe impact weather events such as heatwaves and storms. Traditional models of response may eventually be unsustainable to protect the emergency service worker in this new environment.

Throughout 2015-2017, emergency service agencies around Australia participated in workshops hosted by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC to consider the major issues in natural hazards emergency management.

This publication on workplace health and safety summarises the outcomes of one of these workshops and poses questions as a guide for a national research agenda in natural hazard emergency management.

Individual agencies and jurisdictions have long-established health management policy and standard operational procedures (SOPs). However, multifaceted work, health and safety challenges, such as an ageing workforce, increased focus on mental health and wellbeing and climate change are beginning to impact agencies and jurisdictions stretching current policies and SOPs.

The ageing workforce of the emergency management sector is a well-recognised issue for both the volunteer and paid workforce, and at a minimum will put pressure on health management processes and fitness for role with significant pressure on the physical resilience of responders. The impacts of climate change, change in frequency and intensity of emergencies and increased probability of cascading and concurrent events are also expected to test the work health and safety policies in emergency response agencies. It is anticipated that innovations in technology and practice will result in new policy and methodologies that will subsume the traditional role of the emergency management responder and will serve to help the sector to better manage workplace health and safety. How fitness for role is managed may look quite different in the future, and health and workplace management will need to adapt to a new paradigm.

The health of emergency management personnel is consistently tested through exposure to strenuous and traumatic events. A burning building poses both immediate(through exposure to a risky situation including toxic substances) and long-term threats such as mental health or cancer from long-term exposure. In addition to common workplace stressors (for example bullying and excessive workload), exposure to cumulative incidents can also result in a subsequent cumulative effect. Most agencies support emergency responders through residual cultural and other support mechanisms. However, there is a small percentage of responders that go on to experience mental health conditions after an incident. Understanding and integrating this into emergency management organisations is a complex task, as organisations begin to unravel the impact of emergency response on physical and mental health of the workforce.

- **What is the impact of mental injury and illness to emergency service personnel and of an ageing workforce on the physical resilience of first responders?**
- **What is the impact of a shift to an all hazards-all agencies model in terms of the knowledge requirements of emergency management practitioners?**
- **How can the industry minimise the risk of hazardous substances exposure to first responders and the community arising from the type of building products and designs increasingly being used in the built environment?**
- **How do we minimise the risks posed to emergency management responders?**
- **What is the impact of presumptive cancer legislation on the work of first responders?**

Safety of the workforce is a primary concern of any emergency management agency. More recently within Australia and New Zealand there has been an increase in the harmonisation of work, health and safety law. The maturity of the legislation is variable and the methods to integrate the model legislation have resulted in some variation in the enacted requirements. Society's expectations of employers providing a safe workplace, however, continue to increase. It is important that agencies and government provide leadership to the sector to provide an example to ensure that organisations continue to protect and support their workforce.

- **How are we preparing to respond to the increased range of exposures to which emergency management personnel may face?**
- **What is the relationship between diversity and a safer workforce? How can we identify and value add to safety through diversity?**
- **Governments and society have an increasing expectation for a more diverse workforce—that is free from discrimination and more reflective of the community that is being served. How can we use the link between diversity and safety as a key driver for change?**

Revision of work health and safety policy, culture and practice and providing leadership to the sector requires a transitional phase where adaptive measures are considered, implemented and evaluated. The current state of work, health and safety in the emergency management sector questions how sector organisations adopt flexible workplace practices to support a resilient workforce in a more complex and intense environment. In addition, how can emergency management agencies capitalise on new technologies to meet these new challenges, moreover what opportunities do new technologies offer emergency management organisations in this regard?

It is resource intensive for agencies and jurisdictions in the emergency management sector to independently navigate work health and safety challenges. A national evidence-based approach is a more compelling alternative, but requires input from the entire sector to be effective.

- **What research can be done to support research and change management in workplace, health and safety in the emergency management sector?**
- **How can emergency management agencies capitalise on new technologies to meet these new challenges?**
- **What adaptive measures can be used to help the sector transition to a modern work place consistent with the environment around it?**

National research priorities for natural hazards emergency management

What are the most significant natural hazard emergency management issues Australia faces over the next 10 years?

This was the question posed to emergency service agencies around Australia in a series of workshops hosted by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC throughout 2016.

This publication is an outcome of one of these workshops and part of a broader national research agenda in natural hazards emergency management being developed by the CRC.

The workshops provided an exploration of major issues that would benefit from the support of research at a national level. There was no attempt to solve any of the issues or problems raised nor was there any discussion on the details of specific research projects. The participants discussed the issues they believed were relevant to the specific topic under discussion, the relative importance of the issues and the reasons underpinning their relative importance.

This series of publications summarises the outcomes of the workshops conducted so far – more will take place in 2017. They provide a guide for future research activities by identifying national priorities across major themes. The workshop outcomes have also influenced the evolving research agenda of the CRC.

This statement has been developed with the assistance of AFAC's Work Health and Safety technical group which hosted a workshop with key natural hazard stakeholders in Melbourne and by video conference in all other Australian states on 18 May 2016.

CONTACT US

Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC
Email: office@bnhcrc.com.au