

Environmental responsibility in emergency management – Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) position

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Abstract

Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) members are working cooperatively through the Environmental Management Work Group to develop guidance on improving environmental performance. The Work Group currently includes representatives from New Zealand and across Australia.

As a first step, AFAC has adopted an interim position, which states: 'AFAC is committed to delivering emergency services in an environmentally-responsible way, in partnership with the community, regulatory and planning bodies and other centres of expertise'.

This paper outlines the guiding principles contained in the interim position. It also provides examples of what member organisations are doing to manage environmental risks and to make environmental management part of their normal business.

Introduction

Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) members are working cooperatively through the Environmental Management Work Group (EMWG) to develop guidance on improving environmental performance for emergency managers (Rees et al 2007). The Work Group currently includes representatives from New Zealand and across Australia.

As a first step, EMWG has prepared a policy position on environmental responsibility. This has been adopted by AFAC Council as an interim position which is to be reviewed in 2008.

Interim position

The interim position (AFAC 2007) states: 'AFAC is committed to delivering emergency services in an environmentally-responsible way, in partnership with the community, regulatory and planning bodies and other centres of expertise'.

The interim position includes the following principles:

'AFAC supports the following outcomes:

- protection of the environment from the effects of emergencies, and emergency service activities, where this does not impact on safety, or the effectiveness and efficiency of operations,
- delivery of emergency management (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery from emergencies, including infrastructure and support) in a way which minimises waste and resource use, and to protect the quality of biodiversity, water, soil and air for current and future generations,
- enhancement of environmental values through fire, where this does not impact on safety (for example, prescribed burning carried out for ecological objectives), and
- undertaking of good environmental practices when managing emergency services agencies.

To help achieve these outcomes, AFAC supports:

- the introduction of good environmental practice through processes which engage stakeholders, utilise their skills and experience, and builds their capacity,
- the use of management systems which enable environmental risks and obligations to be identified, appropriate management actions to be developed, and results to be reviewed to assist improvement, and
- the integration of environmental considerations into all decision-making.'

Why do we need a position on environmental responsibility?

The community expects all services provided by government and other organisations to be delivered in an economically, socially and environmentally responsible way. These expectations are becoming increasingly reflected in law and policy at the international, national, state and local levels.

Emergency service members also want to be environmentally-responsible where they can.

The interim position affirms and builds on what many member agencies are already doing. For example, many emergency service agencies already have:

- a commitment to protecting the environment from the effects of emergencies and emergency management in their legislation,
- an environment policy which meets international standards for environmental management,
- environmental guidance in their policies, procedures, tools and training which addresses the principles outlined in the interim position, and
- environmental management included in their key decision-making and review processes.

While many agencies have made significant advances in building environmental management into their business, a strategic position on 'environmental responsibility in emergency management' will help to guide future work of AFAC and member agencies in this increasingly important area.

A position will also help to demonstrate that AFAC and member agencies are working to meet community expectations and provide a basis for communication and collaboration with regulators and the community.

How was the interim position developed?

The need for an AFAC position on this topic was identified in the EMWG Work Plan (Project 2.1), which was approved AFAC Council in 2005 (AFAC 2005).

The position was drafted by EMWG members, based on a review of:

- member agency responses to a survey on environmental management,
- legal obligations and environment policies of eleven member agencies,
- other comments and indications of support from these agencies,
- the approved EMWG charter, and
- the international environmental management standard ISO 14001 (Standards Australia and Standards New Zealand 2004).

AFAC Council adopted the position on an interim basis, for review in 2008.

Further information

If you would like further information on the interim position, or the work of EMWG, or to provide feedback to assist review of the interim position, please contact one of the authors of this paper, who will refer you to your agency contact.

References

AFAC (2005) *Environmental Management Work Group Work Plan (2005-2008)*. Unpublished report, AFAC, Australia.

AFAC (2007) *Interim position: Environmental responsibility in emergency management*. Unpublished report, AFAC, Australia.

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