

## **Environmental responsibility in emergency management – what the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) is doing**

Russell Rees<sup>1</sup>, Helen Bull<sup>2</sup>, Shannon Heathcote<sup>3</sup>, Tania Tolliday<sup>4</sup>, Mike Wouters<sup>5</sup>

1 Country Fire Authority, PO Box 701 Mt Waverley, Victoria, Australia, 3149, r.rees@cfa.vic.gov.au

2 Country Fire Authority, PO Box 701 Mt Waverley, Victoria, Australia, 3149, h.bull@cfa.vic.gov.au

3 New South Wales Fire Brigades, PO Box 8249 Sydney South, New South Wales, Australia, shannon.heathcote@fire.nsw.gov.au

4 Melbourne Fire and Emergency Services Board, 456 Albert St East Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, 3002, ttolliday@mfb.vic.gov.au

5 Department for Environment and Heritage - South Australian Government, GPO Box 1047 Adelaide, South Australia, 5001, wouters.mike@saugov.sa.gov.au

### **Abstract**

The community expects all services provided by government and other organisations to be delivered in an economically, socially and environmentally responsible way.

While emergency services and land management agencies can help to protect the environment by limiting the effects of fire and other incidents on air, water, land and biodiversity, many emergency management activities have potential to harm the environment. This can expose organisations to significant corporate risk.

Management of environmental risk is not always easy. Environmental protection is not always, or not always seen to be compatible with efficient and effective delivery of services. In addition, many of the issues, and the positive contributions of emergency managers to environmental protection are not well understood by the community.

Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) members from across Australia and New Zealand are working cooperatively through the Environmental Management Work Group (EMWG) to help member agencies to improve their management of environmental risks.

This paper outlines the projects that EMWG is currently working on, and how the products to be developed will help member agencies.

### **Introduction**

The community expects all services provided by government and other organisations to be delivered in an economically, socially and environmentally responsible way.

While emergency services and land management agencies can help to protect the environment by limiting the effects of fire and other incidents on air, water, land and biodiversity, many emergency management activities have potential to harm the environment.

This can expose organisations to significant corporate risk, including legal liability and associated costs, and loss of community and member confidence.

Current environmental issues for emergency services include pollution of air and water, use of scarce water resources, damage to soil and biodiversity and spread of disease. Of growing urgency is the need to address greenhouse gas emissions to help global efforts to slow the rate and severity of climate change.

Management of environmental issues is not always easy. Environmental protection is not always, or not always seen to be compatible with efficient and effective delivery of services. In addition, many of the issues, and the positive contributions of emergency managers to environmental protection are not well understood by the community.

The Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) Environmental Management Work Group (EMWG) has been established to help member agencies, and the emergency service industry as a whole to work cooperatively to tackle these important issues.

Current EMWG priorities are to help:

- member agencies to improve their management of environmental issues, and to
- build the reputation of emergency services for environmentally-responsible service delivery.

### **Role of the AFAC Environmental Management Work Group (EMWG)**

The following charter was approved by AFAC Council (AFAC 2005).

#### **Objective**

The AFAC Environmental Management Working Group (EMWG) will assist AFAC agencies to work towards best practice in environmental care in all aspects of their business (prevention, preparedness, response and recovery from emergencies, and in infrastructure and support).

The EMWG will achieve this through development and promotion of a strategic approach to environmental management and by gaining the support of the community and environmental regulators for AFAC agencies' initiatives.

#### **Focus areas**

- 1 Foster commitment to environmental care in all AFAC agency activities.
- 2 Provide a network and a framework where environmental management issues can be efficiently addressed by member agencies through AFAC.
- 3 Develop, promote and support the systematic implementation of best practice approaches to management of environmental issues by AFAC agencies.
- 4 Support AFAC agencies in influencing community and regulator understanding of the industries' commitment to protecting the environment the issues they face and are addressing.
- 5 Develop guidelines for AFAC agencies to monitor community expectations and assess agency performance in environmental management.

### **Current projects**

The work of EMWG is guided by an approved work plan. It is also guided by the interim AFAC position 'Environmental responsibility in emergency management' which was prepared by EMWG (AFAC 2007 and Rees et al 2007).

EMWG is used by members as a forum for exchange of information on environmental issues.

Current EMWG projects include development of guidelines and tools to assist environmentally-responsible management of:

- hazardous materials and structural fire incidents,
- wildfire prevention and suppression, and
- fire for biodiversity outcomes.

Work is also proceeding on guidelines to assist strategic relationships with environmental regulators. EMWG members have also contributed to other environmental initiatives by AFAC including the development of guidelines for use of recycled water.

## **How EMWG operates**

Each of the current projects has been allocated to one or more agencies which take responsibility for research (including review of national and global initiatives), development of project products and communication with other stakeholders.

EMWG communicates formally through teleconferences and face to face meetings, as well as by telephone and email to:

- share information on environmental issues,
- contribute to project products, and
- review progress in implementing the work plan.

## **EMWG membership**

EMWG currently includes representatives from ten agencies from across Australia and New Zealand:

- Country Fire Authority, Victoria,
- Country Fire Service, South Australia,
- Department for Environment and Heritage, South Australia,
- Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria,
- Fire and Emergency Services Authority, Western Australia,
- Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board, Victoria,
- New South Wales Fire Brigades,
- New Zealand Fire Service,
- Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, and
- Tasmania Fire Service.

Additional agencies are represented by observers, who contribute on a needs basis. These include:

- Airservices Australia,
- Australian Capital Territory Fire Brigade,
- Bureau of Meteorology,
- Department of Environment and Conservation, Western Australia,
- Forestry Tasmania, and
- Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services.

## **Further information and involvement**

If you would like to learn more about, or contribute to the work of EMWG, please contact one of the authors of this paper, who will refer you to your agency contact.

We would also like to hear from other organisations working on similar issues.

## **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.

Rees, Bull, Heathcote, Tolliday, Wouters (2007) *Environmental responsibility in emergency management – Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) position*. Proceedings, AFAC Conference, Hobart, Australia.