

Rural Councils Victoria

Response to the 'Councils and Emergencies Directions Paper'

Rural Councils Victoria (RCV) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the *Councils and Emergencies Directions Paper*.

RCV supports the need to clarify emergency management responsibilities. RCV member Councils represent 79% of Victoria's total land mass and our residents live in areas susceptible to emergencies and natural disaster, such as floods and bushfires (amongst others). Clear roles and responsibilities are an important element to mitigating the risks posed to our communities.

About RCV

RCV represents the interests of the 38 rural Councils across Victoria. The organisation was recently incorporated and its purposes are to:

- (1) heighten awareness and understanding of issues that impact on rural communities
- (2) assist with building the capacity of rural councils to face challenges
- (3) provide leadership on local governance
- (4) develop and support rural councils; and
- (5) develop policy and advocate for rural councils.

THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT CHALLENGE - RURAL COUNCILS' PERSPECTIVE

The emergency management role of rural councils has shifted from a response-based resource support to a more complex community resilience, relief and recovery role. This refocusing of emphasis brings greater demands and requires longer-term commitments from rural Councils which face various challenges in providing this level of service — whether legislated or otherwise.

These challenges include:

Financial

Rural Councils are already under increasing financial pressure to deliver more with fewer resources. This has been exacerbated by:

Revenue factors, including:

- Indexation freeze on Commonwealth Financial Assistance Grants
- Imposition of the Fair Go Rates Policy
- Cessation of the Country Roads and Bridges program
- Cessation of the Community Infrastructure Development Program

- Councils' reliance on grant income has more than doubled in the past five years, despite an increase in own-source revenue

Expenditure factors, including:

- Costs imposed on Councils
- Compliance responsibilities imposed on Councils
- Significant infrastructure assets managed by rural councils
- Delivering services over vast geographic areas
- Contributions to services and infrastructure to facilitate basic service levels for the community (eg contribution to mobile phone towers, recreation facilities, libraries, maternal and child health facilities, kindergartens)

Meanwhile, data and observations from the Whelan Report show that:

- Twenty-three of the 24 small and very small rural councils are very adversely affected by environmental factors, and 21 of these (88%) are rated as financially vulnerable/very vulnerable.
- Eighteen of the most vulnerable councils – all of which are RCV councils – had a combined operating deficit of \$34 million.

More recently, data presented in the Victorian Auditor General's Office (VAGO) report provides some insights about small councils in Victoria, including that:

- councils' reliance on grant income 'had more than doubled' in the past five years, despite an increase in own-source revenue.
- service delivery reviews had focused on identifying 'cost savings' rather than being informed by an 'adequate understanding of community needs'.
- changes to the demographic profiles of councils, in particular ageing, represented significant challenges.
- adequate support and guidance needs to be provided for these councils, in particular by LGV.

Several of the indices returning 'Medium' or 'High' risk are explained in the VAGO Report as being due to particular circumstances, such as borrowing to cover the defined benefit superannuation funding, timing of natural disaster funding and associated works etc.

'Small Shires' are the most vulnerable as their ratepayer bases are smaller, making them highly dependent on government funding to maintain their operations, and that 'their reliance on government funding exposes them to the potential for higher financial risks in the future.

This data reveals the very real financial pressures facing rural councils. The obligations and legislative requirements that go along with emergency management make the challenges harder for Councils that can least afford it. Paradoxically some of these most financially vulnerable rural Councils are located in areas most prone to disaster or emergency response.

SKILLS, EXPERTISE AND RESOURCING

The role of Victorian local government in emergency management has been constantly evolving.

Emergency management is already a complex legislative framework, yet community service expectations, major disaster events and new legislation have burdened rural Councils with new roles and requirements. This has increased the risk of councils not being able to comply with the range of legislative requirements as well as the possible failure to meet community needs and expectations.

As the demands on local government have broadened and increased, staff have increasingly found themselves juggling emergency management related roles on top of their substantive position, effectively making their emergency management role only a small part of their day-to-day roles. The growing necessity for council officers to perform multiple roles within one position, coupled with limited professional development opportunities and a lack of accredited, competency-based training has meant that the local government pool of expertise in emergency management is small. On the whole, this significantly affects the capacity and capability of councils to meet their obligations, particularly in large or protracted events.

In the recent Issues Paper for the Emergency Management Legislation (Planning) Exposure Draft, the Victorian Government has acknowledged that "preparing an integrated emergency management plan for each region or municipal district will be a complex task".

Rural councils do not have large pools of staff available to fulfil emergency management planning responsibilities (and response and recovery).

Whilst Councils deliver a significant range of services to communities, employing staff such as kindergarten teachers, librarians, customer service staff, garbage collectors, road maintenance crew, planning officers and finance officers, these staff do not necessarily have a high level of emergency management expertise or experience. This is particularly the case for smaller rural Councils where often the only staff with non-core service provision responsibilities and capacity to actively contribute to emergency response and recovery responsibilities are senior executive staff whose primary role is organisational management.

This results in an increased risk to rural community members as rural Councils may not be in a position to appropriately respond to emergency management responsibilities. A one size fits all approach to councils will not effectively manage the risk exposure to small rural communities.

Our most significant concern is the increased risk to our community members as a result of the very limited capacity of small rural councils to prepare for, respond to and recover from an emergency event.

RESPONSE TO THE COUNCILS AND EMERGENCIES DIRECTIONS PAPER

There is also an expectation from State and Federal Governments and from the community that councils will continue to direct considerable long-term effort towards risk mitigation and prevention. While Rural Councils will always play a vital role in emergency management, to be effective it must be a shared responsibility.

RCV notes the Draft Submission offered by the Municipal Association of Victoria and supports the recommendations, models and responses outlined in this submission, particularly:

- The table outlining the accuracy and appropriateness of the report's blue descriptors
- The need for clearer council role descriptions in emergency management
- Developing an emergency response model that better reflects the variation in capability and capacity between and within Victorian councils

CONCLUSION

Rural councils have a key role to play in emergency management and supporting community safety. Of the various agencies that support communities during an emergency, it is the local Council that has the unique position of being the most familiar with the community being supported.

While councils are one of the few constants for communities throughout emergency management planning, response and recovery, it's important to note that local government is not a specialist in any particular emergency or disaster, nor does it necessarily have the adequate resourcing and expertise to lead and direct resources to respond to an emergency and help communities recover.

Staff in rural councils tasked with emergency management responsibilities are doing so while managing expansive day-to-day roles. Often they have little emergency management experience or training. This scenario increases the risk to rural community members as rural Councils may not be in a position to appropriately respond to emergency management responsibilities. A one size fits all approach to councils will not effectively manage the risk exposure to small rural communities.

Council's primary purpose in an emergency should be to ensure its resources are readily available to oversee the continuity of essential community services and the early initiation of relief and recovery services, with the support of relevant agencies.

The current review of the roles and responsibilities for Councils in emergency management is a welcome step towards achieving greater clarity for the sector.