



MID-WESTERN REGIONAL COUNCIL 2019/20 BUSHFIRES

LESSONS LEARNT REPORT

6 APRIL 2021

MID-WESTERN REGIONAL COUNCIL
MID-WESTERN REGIONAL COUNCIL
OPERATIONS

 TOWARDS 2030



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In early December 2019 through to late January 2020 Mid-Western Regional Council area was impacted by bushfires particularly the communities of Running Stream and Olinda. The fires caused damage to houses, out buildings, fencing and live stock

Council played an important role in supporting the Local Emergency Management Committee and the Rural Fire Service with administrative support through the LEMO role. Also Operational Support through traffic control and road closures. Council also supplied staff, plant and equipment to provide fire breaks as directed by RFS.

A post disaster briefing was undertaken with all Council staff regarding Councils preparedness, response and recover efforts.

This identified there are many challenges which Council faced and generally performed very well however there are always lessons to be learned which will better prepare Council for the next emergency event. This report documents those lessons and makes recommendations to enable continuous improvement in our Emergency Management processes and procedures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PREPAREDNESS

1. Note the EM Plan has recently been updated and it is recommended the new plan be adopted.
2. An education campaign be developed to improve the community's preparedness for disasters.
3. Additional resources be allocated to emergency management preparedness.
4. A new and adequate Emergency Operation Centre be established.
5. Identify and establish the location, role and facilities required for Evacuation centres.
6. Review Council resources to provide Operational, Customer Service, Emergency Management and Media Support during a prolonged disaster event.
7. Review the level of detail captured in existing asset registers.
8. Review the vulnerability of remote communities and identify risk mitigation measures to improve safety.
9. Review Council's Business Continuity Plan ensuring community and statutory emergency management responsibilities are included.
10. Relationships between all agencies continue to be developed through the Local Emergency Management processes.

RESPONSE

1. Ensure staff receive appropriate recognition for effort during disasters.
2. Engage a Community Liaison Officer at an early stage of a disaster.
3. Identify pay arrangements prior to staff being call out to undertake emergency activities.
4. Provide administration and managerial support to Works Officers and Supervisors to develop suitable rosters during emergencies
5. Investigate the use of improved communications including satellite phones, GPS tracking systems etc. for remote and isolated staff.
6. Ensure all staff understand they have a responsibility to pass on all changes in field conditions as they arise.
7. Ensure cost control systems are in place to accurately record expenditure.
8. Ensure allocation of financial resources to respond to emergency events are undertaken in the correct procedure.
9. Keep the Grant funding authority up to date with all activities and forecast expenditures
10. When engaging services monitor forecast expenditures to ensure authorisation procedures are followed.
11. Ensure all staff are aware of Council's Gift and Benefits Policy

RECOVERY

1. Council work proactively with the community to setup meetings as early as possible following future disaster events.
2. Council develop a 'Community Recovery Guide' and undertake a Community awareness campaign.
3. The Mayor and General Manager keep the Local Members informed of Council's proactive community engagement in an attempt to minimize mixed messages from various tiers of Government.

4. Ensure there is one source of truth collating details of houses and buildings destroyed. This would allow staff to use reliable information when in direct contact with impacted owners and assist them in understanding the planning pathways available.
5. Ensure the Fact Sheet “Re-Building after the Bushfires” is maintained and readily available to be shared with impacted residents in the future.
6. Appoint a dedicated planning officer to receive enquiries and prioritise requests in the future.
7. Identify roles and responsibilities between Council and Other Organisations undertaking field recovery operations. Clarify what Council will support and what Council will not support.
8. Keep Grant Administration agency up to date with progress. Advise at the earliest opportunity variations to agreed estimate of cost.
9. Develop procurement procedures to ensure staff are aware of financial delegations and responsibilities under emergency situations.
10. Seek clarification regarding changes to Local Procurement Policy if State Government announce changes to procurement arrangements.
11. Investigate the use of cost control software during the recovery stage of a disaster.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report to record and document the preparedness, response and recovery actions undertaken by Mid-Western Regional Council following the 2019/20 Bushfire event within the Local Government Area and capture 'Lessons Learned' that will enable continuous improvement of Emergency Management processes and procedures.

A debriefing session undertaken 14 October 2020 attended by all sections of Council including; Operations, Communications, Customer Service, Planning & Development, Finance, Workshop and Procurement provided much of the content of this report.

BACKGROUND

The 2019-2020 NSW bushfires were unprecedented in extent and intensity. The fires started in one of Australia's hottest and driest years on record, with much of the areas burnt already severely impacted by drought.

Within the Mid-Western Regional LGA over 240,000 hectares were burnt by two fires, the Kerry Ridge and Upper Turon Rd fires. 213 land holdings, comprising over 29,000 hectares, were affected and 16 homes and 17 outbuildings destroyed or damaged. Over 1000 stock dead or euthanized and 1,500km of fencing burnt.

Many residents and businesses were impacted, directly or indirectly, by these fires, the impact and losses only to be embittered by the following events of storm damage in some areas and COVID-19.

These events have exposed our vulnerabilities and are a call to action for better planning for the prevention of, preparation for, response to and recovery from potential future emergencies.

PREPAREDNESS

1. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PLANNING

1.1. EMERGENCY RISK MANAGEMENT & RECOVERY PLANS

While Local Government acts as a partner in emergency management, legislation does not define clearly all the tasks that Local Government undertakes. Whilst primarily Local Government works to provide ongoing support to local communities during and after an emergency, Council plays a very important role in the prevention of, preparation for, response to and recovery from emergencies (PPRR) by providing support to the community by

- effective, risk-based land management and planning arrangements and other mitigation activities
- communication arrangements
- education systems
- support for individuals and communities to prepare for extreme events
- support for emergency services and volunteers
- recovery arrangements, including evaluation and learning, to adapt for future events.

RECOMMENDATION

Council develop and implement the following:

- *Enterprise Risk Management Plan (ERM)*
- *Business Continuity Plan*
- *Local Recovery Plan*

1.2. COMMUNITY AWARENESS.

The Bushfires highlighted the unpreparedness of the community and lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies during and after the disaster.

RECOMMENDATION

An education campaign be developed to improve the community's preparedness for disasters.

1.3. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT RESOURCING

1.3.1. The LEMC and LEMO Role

The SERM Act (1989) requires –

1. *Council's GM to Chair LEMC committee meetings, however the Chair may delegate the responsibility or nominate a Deputy.*
2. *Council appoint the LEMO to provide executive support to the LEMC and the LEOCON. The LEMO, a non-voting member of the LEMC, provides technical advice to the Chair*

of the LEMC and to the LEOCON during emergency operations and events controlled by the LEOCON.

3. *Council to be responsible for coordinating and undertaking the administrative responsibilities of the LEMC. This includes keeping and maintaining records of all meetings, working groups, event reports, briefings, debriefs, and other action reviews. The retention of LEMC documents for the prescribed time periods is undertaken by Council on behalf of the LEMC.*

Historically at MWRC the role has been an “add on” to existing senior staff duties. The LEMO is required to act as Chair of the LEMC and have voting rights as he represents Council on the LEMC as no other senior Council member is present on behalf of Council.

Whilst this is technically allowable under the SERM Act it is quite a responsible and demanding role. Recent events have demonstrated that emergency management preparedness needs to be increased. This requires substantial administrative support to the LEMO and LEMC.

RECOMMENDATION

- Additional resources be allocated to provide administrative support to the LEMO and LEMC to improve emergency management preparedness.
- Council provide a senior staff member, other than the LEMO, to the LEMC to act and vote on behalf of Council on the LEMC.

1.3.2 Facilities (Emergency Operation Centre – EOC & Evacuation Centres)

The current nominated EOC is located within the RFS building, Depot Road Mudgee. A new EOC is to be established within the new RFS facility planned to be constructed at the airport sometime within the next 5 years.

During the 2019/2020 bushfires the LEOCON chose not to open an EOC and response to the event was led by the RFS (Combat Agency) from the RFS control room located at Depot Rd, Mudgee. Despite the EOC not having been stood up the bushfire event did push into question the operational readiness of the existing nominated EOC's, not just in our LGA but across the State.

To establish an accurate picture of this an audit was undertaken by the LEMO in accordance with Resilience NSW criteria in June 2020, the outcome being the existing EOC room facility severely lacking and unsuitable. Following this the LEMO arranged for a request for funding of necessary improvements to be raised to Resilience NSW. This request reached the office of the Commissioner however funding has been denied for reason that the opportunity exists to incorporate the EOC specification within the planned new RFS facility. This is true, however does not resolve the matter of the adequateness of the existing EOC in the interim.

RECOMMENDATION

- A new and adequate Emergency Operation Centre be established.
- During the Bushfire Event there was confusion regarding Evacuation centres. This included whether they were official centre, the location of evacuation centre, the role provided by evacuation centres and the facilities required to adequately function as an evacuation centre.

RECOMMENDATION

Liaise and assist the LEMO and LEOCON to identify and establish the location, role and facilities required for Evacuation centres and neighbourhood safer places.

2. COUNCIL ASSETS

2.1. Council Staff

MWRC is fortunate to have highly skilled and enthusiastic staff who can adopt their skills to emergency response very quickly.

MWRC is well resourced to respond to a short emergency however resources would be stretched during a prolonged emergency.

RECOMMENDATION

- Review Council resources to provide Operational, Customer Service, Emergency Management and Media Support during a prolonged disaster event.

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2.2. Council Infrastructure

2.2.1. Asset Registers

It would appear the administrative agencies for Natural Disaster funding rely more heavily on documented evidence of the type, number and condition of assets rather than relying on field inspections to justify damage costs.

Therefore the need to have clear, transparent and up to date asset registers is critical to prepare for disasters.

The level of detail captured by existing asset registers may need to be reviewed. For example much of the roadside vegetation which was burned and needed attention following the fire was not recorded in existing asset registers. Also details of all signs and guardrail was not available in all areas.

2.2.2. Road Network Accessibility

MWRC was very fortunate that the bushfires did not damage built infrastructure such as bridges. There are many remote communities within the local Government area with one access which traverses through dense bushland and across critical bridge infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATION

Review the vulnerability of remote communities and identify risk mitigation measures to improve safety.

3. INTERNAL PROCEDURES

Although MWRC staff adapted quickly from business as usual to emergency management roles many staff during debrief highlighted the need for better documented procedures during an emergency.

RECOMMENDATION

Review Council's Business Continuity Plan ensuring community and statutory emergency management responsibilities are included.

4. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN AGENCIES

During an emergency respect, trust, cooperation and good will is essential. MWRC is fortunate this exists between all emergency agencies.

RECOMMENDATION

Relationships between all agencies continue to be developed through the Local Emergency Management processes.

RESPONSE

5. COUNCIL STAFF & LIAISON OFFICER

Although the bushfires commenced during the traditional Christmas closedown period many staff gave up their holiday break and returned to work.

Council provided Operational support to the RFS including; road closures and opening, traffic control, road clearing, fuel supply, plant and equipment to establish fire breaks under the direction of the incident controller.

Council also provided; customer service, media and communications.

The recognition of staff was impacted by the COVID 19 epidemic.

RECOMMENDATION

Ensure staff receive appropriate recognition for effort during disasters. The appointment of a Bushfire Liaison Officer during the recovery phase was very beneficial. Earlier engagement of such a role will benefit during future disasters.

6. INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

6.1. Call Out Arrangements

Many staff were asked to return to work from annual leave. Also there was a lot of overtime required including working weekends and public holidays.

Unfortunately there was confusion regarding penalty rates which disappointed some staff.

RECOMMENDATION

Identify pay arrangements prior to staff returning to work to undertake emergency activities.

6.2. Rostering (Breaks and Relief Staff)

During an emergency staff can be willing to stay and work extended hours however award conditions with minimum breaks must be observed.

For emergencies that extend continuously for over 24 hours and potentially for many days the rostering and scheduling of staff can be challenging.

RECOMMENDATION

Provide administration and managerial support to Works Officers and Supervisors to develop suitable rosters during emergencies.

6.3. Administration Support

Administration support to field operations is essential for smooth delivery, recording and payment of services. They also provide essential updates to communication and media staff.

Unfortunately because the Bushfires continued through the Christmas closedown period a lot of catch-up was required.

RECOMMENDATION

Ensure admin staff are relieved from business as usual and dedicated to emergency management activities

6.4. Remote & Isolated Crews (GPS, Pinpoint etc.)

Several crews and individual plant operators were working in remote and isolated locations. Communications can be difficult in such locations. Supervisors must know where all staff are located at all times. This can be challenging with a dynamic situation and the changing of shifts. Housekeeping such as fatigue, mental health, food and water are essential activities during an emergency. Although some crews were working at the direction of the Incident Controller the welfare of Council staff remains the responsibility of Council Supervisors.

RECOMMENDATION

Investigate the use of improved communications including satellite phones, GPS tracking systems etc. for remote and isolated staff.

6.5. Updates to Communications Staff (road closures and openings)

As mentioned above admin staff play a vital role in passing on up to date field information to Communication staff.

However all staff should be conscious that changes in field conditions should be passed up the chain of command as soon as possible.

RECOMMENDATION

All staff understand they have a responsibility to pass on all changes in field conditions as they arise.

7. GOVERNANCE ISSUES

7.1. Field Record Keeping (fuel allocation, plant location, activities undertaken, road closures etc.)

The grant administration agencies may require clear and transparent documented evidence regarding spending during an emergency event.

Field staff can be fully occupied with responding to events however accurate record keeping is essential.

RECOMMENDATION

Ensure cost control systems are in place to accurately record expenditure.

7.2. Approval to Spend (GM/Mayor/Council)

During an emergency one of Council's strengths is to respond quickly with considerable resources. However the General Manager and Mayor have only limited delegation to expend funds even under emergency situations.

The declarations of Natural Disaster funding can be delayed and even if funds are granted it is the elected Councils' responsibility to allocate funds to enable staff to act.

Typically an extraordinary Council meeting will need to be convened to enable expenditure, response and recovery action actions to occur.

This did not happen during the 2020 Bushfires placing Council at considerable financial risk.

RECOMMENDATION

Allocation of financial resources to respond to emergency events are undertaken in the correct procedure.

7.3. Grant Approvals and Administration

During the response period of a natural disaster the requirements of the grant administration and approval authority are not always fully understood. The best course of action is to keep the authority as fully informed as possible regarding the extent of damage, the response actions being undertaken and a rolling budget estimate of the final cost.

Even if the event has not yet been declared a natural disaster communication with the likely approving authority should be established as early as possible.

RECOMMENDATION

Keep the Grant funding authority up to date with all activities and forecast expenditures.

7.4. Existing Service Contracts – limitations

Existing service contracts for hired plant & equipment, tree lopping services, traffic control etc. can be an advantage in emergency situations as quick and easy engagement is possible. The exact extent and expenditure may not be known at the time of engagement. Therefore, follow up authorisation may be required by more senior staff. This may also lead to the need for exemptions from existing procedures or policies which can only be granted by the General Manager or Council.

RECOMMENDATION

When engaging services monitor forecast expenditures to ensure authorisation procedures are followed.

7.5. Managing 'Good Will' Gifts

During response operations people can be very grateful for services provided by Council. They may also try to influence staff to undertake services. On occasions good will gifts are offered to staff.

RECOMMENDATION

Ensure all staff are aware of Council's Gifts & Benefits Policy.

8. RECOVERY

8.1. Community Engagement

8.1.1. Community Meetings

The bushfires in the area commenced in late November 2019 and were not brought under control until late January 2020. Therefore there was no distinct cross over from response to recovery phases. Some communities were in recovery mode however others were still in response mode. Priority for resources was provided to the response at the expense of those trying to recover.

Community meeting were setup by a mixture of community, volunteer organisations and the Local Federal Member. Agendas were either too narrowly focused or attendees were bombarded with information from numerous government and volunteer agencies.

In hindsight Council could have taken a more proactive lead in conducting community meetings which may have improved Council's ability to manage community expectations.

RECOMMENDATION

Council work proactively with the community to setup meetings as early as possible following future disaster events.

8.1.2. Managing Community Expectations

There was misunderstanding between members of the community and Council regarding Council's responsibilities for Natural Disaster Recovery and also various Government Grants.

The community had the expectation Council would help out with restoration of private property such as boundary fence repairs and removal of dangerous trees on private property. Council's responsibility under Natural Disaster Funding was to restore public infrastructure such as roads including making safe trees on roadsides. Also many Government Grants were not specific regarding project eligibility. Again the community had the expectation the grants should be spent on private property restoration whereas Council allocated funds to projects benefiting the broader community and economy.

This issue was further complicated by Local Members providing advice on how they understood the funds should be allocated.

This caused some tension between affected communities and Council.

RECOMMENDATION

Council develop a 'Community Recovery Guide' and undertake a Community awareness campaign.

The organizing of early community meeting recommended above will help manage community expectations.

The Mayor and General Manager keep the Local Members informed of Council's proactive community engagement in an attempt to minimize mixed messages from various tiers of Government.

8.1.3. DA and Planning Approvals

Some houses and buildings were damaged or destroyed by the bushfires. In many instances the effected owner did not understand the Development Application and Planning Approval process necessary to rebuild.

Planning staff prepared a Fact Sheet "Re-Building after the Bushfires" to assist impacted owners as they moved towards the rebuilding process. It was circulated to residents via email and shared at the Local Recovery meetings.

Council also agreed to waive fees associated with the rebuilding process to assist impacted owners.

Based on the information provided post fire, there were 11 homes and 13 outbuildings destroyed in the fires. Council received only 1 application to rebuild.

A planning officer was dedicated to the bushfire enquiries in order to prioritise requests. It was apparent in dealing with enquiries and complaints regarding rebuilding that whilst some impacted owners did not understand the planning process, others chose to ignore them.

One of the difficulties for Council's Development staff in offering assistance to impacted owners was not knowing which houses and outbuildings were destroyed during the fires. The information circulated during the fires was not always accurate, making it difficult to advise whether the

houses/buildings destroyed had existing planning approvals in place or not, and what the appropriate course of action was for obtaining any necessary approvals to rebuild.

RECOMMENDATION

Ensure there is one source of truth collating details of houses and buildings destroyed by fire. This would allow staff to use reliable information when in direct contact with impacted owners and assist them in understanding the planning pathways available.

Ensure the Fact Sheet “Re-Building after the Bushfires” is maintained and readily available to be shared with impacted residents in the future.

Appoint a dedicated planning officer to receive enquiries and prioritise requests in the future

9. MANAGING OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Council was also involved in the management other recovery organisations undertaking field based operations including the Australian Defense Force and Blaze Aid.

The Australian Defense Force consisted of Army Reservists with some supporting equipment. However the personnel and equipment changed approximately every two weeks. This made allocation of tasks difficult due to the variable capability of each group. Some groups could work independently with a small bulldozer and trucks. Other groups could only support Council activities with labour and transport.

The Blaze Aid group rely on volunteers for their workforce. They work directly with property owners to repair fencing. However Council was involved in locating suitable camps and also administrating Government grants to support their operations.

RECOMMENDATION

Identify roles and responsibilities between Council and Other Organisations undertaking field recovery operations. Clarify what Council will support and what Council will not support.

10. GRANT ADMINISTRATION

Numerous grants were provided for recovery including road repairs under Natural Disaster funding, economic stimulus and improve resilience funding.

They are administered by many different Government departments with varying eligibility criteria and payment requirements.

Therefore projects need to be setup with the correct cost and other controls to demonstrate conformance with funding requirements.

Typically road repairs under Natural Disaster Funding is administered by the State Road Authority now Transport for NSW. The scope of restoration works is agreed and work proceeds. However with the recent bushfires the process involved an arborist assessing trees for safety and then appropriate works being undertaken. This made estimating the total forecast cost difficult, with costs exceeding initial estimates.

RECOMMENDATION

Keep Grant Administration agency up to date with progress. Advise at the earliest opportunity variations to agreed estimate of cost.

11. INTERNAL GOVERNANCE

11.1. Procurement Issues

Monitoring actual cost compared to estimated cost is also essential for internal cost control purposes. As mentioned above it was difficult to estimate the full value of some services at the time of engagement. There was further confusion amongst Engineers and Works Officers regarding advice from State Government regarding exemptions from normal procurement limitations due to the emergency. Services were engaged without following Council policy. The value of work with some orders exceeded the authorization level of the responsible officer and also exceeded thresholds in Council's procurement policy. This necessitated seeking exemptions from policy through endorsement by Council.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop procurement procedures to ensure staff are aware of financial delegations and responsibilities under emergency situations.

Seek clarification regarding changes to Local Procurement Policy if State Government announce changes to procurement arrangements.

11.2. Cost Control Software

Proprietary software is available to monitor recovery operations which may improve our internal cost control and also provides information for claims to the administering agency.

RECOMMENDATION

Investigate the use of cost control software during the recovery stage of a disaster.

CONCLUSION

The 2019/20 Bushfire event which impacted Mid-Western Regional Council particularly the communities of Running Stream and Olinda had a devastating effect on some homes, rural properties, businesses and the natural environment.

Council played an important role in supporting the Local Emergency Management Committee and the Rural Fire Service with administrative support through the LEMO role. Also Operational Support through traffic control and road closures. Council also supplied staff, plant and equipment to provide fire breaks as directed by RFS.

A post disaster briefing was undertaken with all Council staff regarding Councils preparedness, response and recover efforts.

This identified there are many challenges which Council faced and generally performed very well however there are always lessons to be learned which will better prepare Council for the next emergency event. A total of 32 recommendations are made for future improvement.