

National Arrangements for the State Emergency Service

The State Emergency Service is an emergency and rescue service dedicated to assisting the community. It is made up almost entirely of volunteers, with hundreds of units Australia wide. In each state of Australia the fundamentals and operational activities are essentially the same, with all having a combatant role in the case of operational activities, and they also play an important role in educating the community in how to prepare their private properties for emergency and disaster events which may occur in their regions.

Although they are similar in many ways, the main difference is where they reside hierarchically within the disaster management structure in each state, their functions in the emergency services arena as an emergency response agency, and the means by which they are funded. This varies from state to state as outlined below.

In Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory, the SES is an emergency agency in their own right, as with the Police and Fire Services. The SES is seen as a "Lead Agency" in regards to floods, storms, tsunamis, earthquake, urban and bush search and rescue, vertical rescue, and road rescue. They also assist other agencies in the case of fire, evidence and other specialised searches (for example Police operations). In these roles the SES are in command of the situations, and dictate where resources and operational activities take place.

This "Lead Agency" role differs in QLD, WA, and the Northern Territory, where the SES is classed as a "Primary Responder" to many of the incidents outlined above, however their operational activities are directed by an over-riding multiagency body. In Queensland this is the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services department (QFES), in Western Australia this is the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES), and in the Northern Territory it is the Northern Territory Police Fire and Emergency Services (NTPFES). In these states the SES becomes an 'arm' of their governing body, and their resources are allocated and utilised in accordance to where the need arises by their governing body.

When looking at disaster management structures and the alignment of SES within these structures, again it differs in each state. Although there are differences in the way each state construct their disaster management procedures, essentially they work under the same principals. There is an Act of Legislation which determines who is responsible for the coordination, planning, preparation, response and recovery from disasters and emergencies in each state. In QLD this is the Disaster Management Act 2003, where local government takes a lead role in disaster coordination. A committee is formed to ensure this legislation is adhered to, in the form of a Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG). All local governments coordinate their LDMG's, which are usually chaired by the Mayor or a councillor of the local government area.

In all states the SES is a not-for-profit organisation that is supported through a partnership between the State Government and Local Governments, private and public donations, and in some states (QLD, NT, WA) an Emergency Services Levy charge which is based on the locational boundaries in which residents reside. In the majority of states the SES is considered a state government agency, and therefore a large portion of funding is contributed by the State Government and a smaller portion from the Local Governments/Councils. The difference from state to state is how the funding is allocated to the SES. For example those states where the SES is a stand-alone agency in their own right (NSW and Victoria), the funding is allocated directly to the SES, whereas in states in which the SES is part of an over-arching emergency services department (QLD, NT, WA), funding is allocated to the department (QFES, NTPFES, DFES) and is then divided amongst their member agencies.

In terms of how the SES functions within the Local Disaster Management Group, in Queensland they reside under their governing body the QFES. At meetings they may be represented by QFES or they may represent individually as the SES. This same method of representation can occur during a disaster activation also where they may be represented by a liaison officer from the QFES, who can report on any issues or activities they may be undertaking. In other states, where the SES is a leading agency in their own right, such as NSW, they are an independent member of the group and will have a specific SES liaison officer present during normal and extraordinary meetings and during disaster activations.

In regards to the effectiveness of the different systems in the various states of Australia, each seems to work and provide the response capability and national interoperability required of the SES. The development of a national model in which all states operate under the same guidelines is unlikely, given that every state operates their Police, Fire, Ambulance and SES services independently.