

2012

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**ACT EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCY
RESPONSE TO
MARCH 2012 WEATHER EVENT**

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

**Presented by
Simon Corbell MLA
Minister for Police and Emergency Services**

Mr Speaker, the ACT community owe their ACT State Emergency Service volunteers and others involved in the response to recent storm and flood activity a debt of gratitude.

As Minister for Police and Emergency Services, I would like to place on record that our emergency services volunteers and indeed all who responded to the call for assistance deserve the highest level of recognition for their professional, timely and coordinated response to recent extreme weather events experienced in the ACT and surrounding areas. Their outstanding response serves to highlight the invaluable role our volunteers undertake in providing assistance to the Canberra community 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

The ACT Emergency Services Agency comprising the ACT Ambulance Service, ACT Fire and Rescue, ACT Rural Fire Service, ACT State Emergency Service and the ESA Support Services stand ready to respond to the community's needs 24 hours a day seven days a week. The ACT Emergency Services Agency is made up of paid staff and volunteers dedicated to helping their fellow Canberrans in their time of need.

As of the 31 December 2011, the Emergency Services Agency is supported by 1575 volunteers incorporating the ACT Rural Fire Service (ACTRFS) Volunteer Brigades, ACT State Emergency Service (ACTSES) volunteers, Community Fire Units (CFU's) and Mapping and Planning Support volunteers.

Our volunteers willingly give of their time to maintain community safety and assist the Canberra Community with recovery following emergency events. By its very nature, much of the work undertaken by volunteers can be inherently dangerous and often conducted in the worst possible weather and stressful conditions.

From the period 28 February to 6 March 2012, the ACT experienced prolonged extreme weather conditions resulting in wide spread, if reasonably low level, flooding and an unprecedented number of calls from the Canberra community for assistance.

The Bureau of Meteorology had predicted heavy rain to occur across the ACT from 28 February 2012. In anticipation the ESA prepared for this weather event by making appropriate warnings to the ACT public through media alerts and preparing ESA staff and volunteers, as well as the other emergency services for response activities.

Our volunteers responded to 978 requests for assistance due to storm damage and flooding. Assistance provided to the community included: removal of storm debris, sand bagging of areas under threat of flood, temporary repair of roofs and pumping flood waters out of buildings and houses.

This exceptional response resulted in an extraordinary number of hours being worked by emergency services staff and volunteers, including an estimated:

- 3811 volunteer hours worked by the ACTSES;
- 702 volunteer hours worked by the ACTRFS;
- 1007 hours worked by the Incident Management Team (including staff and volunteers);
- 316 hours worked by Logistics Support;
- 12 volunteer hours worked by Mapping and Planning Support; and
- 212 ACTSES volunteer and staff hours worked in support of NSW SES operations.

No households in the ACT were evacuated during the event; however, to the south of Tharwa, 17 Naas Road residences were isolated for several days as a result of bridge closures. During this time the residents still had foot access across the bridge. The isolated residents were contacted daily by ACTSES staff and volunteers throughout this event to ensure their welfare.

The ESA also assisted the NSW SES in identifying isolated residences along Smiths Road whose only access to the ACT was restricted when a bridge over the Gudgenby River was damaged.

From 28 February to 6 March 2012, 152 ACTSES volunteers assisted the community supported by approximately 80 ACTRFS and MAPS volunteers who also provided assistance. A number of ACTSES volunteers and staff were also deployed to Queanbeyan and Goulburn during this period in support of NSW SES operations. ACT Fire and Rescue and approximately 170 staff and contractors from Territory and Municipal Services also worked alongside the ACTSES in supporting the community during this event.

ACTRFS crews assisted the ACTSES by undertaking flooding jobs (pumping out water), clearing a number of fallen trees, and providing catering for the response crews on Saturday 3 March 2012. ACTRFS volunteers also filled a number of roles within the ACTSES Incident Management Team at the ESA Headquarters in Fairbairn throughout this event.

In addition to providing assistance to the Canberra community, ACT Emergency Services Agency volunteers have also provided assistance to Queensland following significant flooding in December 2010, January 2011, in the aftermath of Cyclone Yasi in early February 2011 and following significant flooding in inland Queensland and North Western NSW in early February 2012.

Following requests through Emergency Management Queensland (EMQ) and the Queensland Red Cross, the ACT Emergency Services Agency provided support to Queensland, through the deployment of ACT State Emergency Service (ACTSES) volunteers and staff and the ESA Mapping and Planning Support group for specialist mapping support.

The ACTSES completed three deployments of a total of 63 members to Queensland to support flood recovery operations in South East Queensland. Work by the ACTSES included cleanup operations in Brisbane and search activities in the Lockyer Valley. Further assistance was provided to assist in clean up operations following Tropical Cyclone Yasi with 90 ACTSES staff and volunteers deploying to North Queensland.

The ESA Mapping and Planning Support (MAPS) group completed 11 deployments comprised of a total 33 members, to assist the Queensland Red Cross. MAPS volunteers operated from Red Cross Headquarters in Brisbane and provided specialist mapping services, including mapping of evacuation centres, locations of isolated and displaced people, storm and flood impacts and infrastructure damage products.

In January of this year, following requests through the Queensland Red Cross, the ACT Emergency Services Agency again provided support to Queensland through the provision of specialist mapping support as part of the Red Cross QLD Major Incident Management Team (IMT) in Brisbane.

The ESA Mapping and Planning Support (MAPS) group completed four (4) deployments of a total of nine (9) members to assist the Queensland Red Cross. MAPS volunteers operated from Red Cross Headquarters in Brisbane and assisted by providing specialist mapping, including mapping of evacuation centres, storm and flood impacts and infrastructure.

Positive feedback was received by all agencies in Queensland and the receiving agency (Red Cross) had nothing but praise for the tasking performed by our MAPS volunteers.

As recently as 17 March the ESA received a further request for assistance from their colleagues in NSW who are still preparing for and responding to the relentless progress of flood waters along the Murrumbidgee River corridor which are now reaching the region of Hay in NSW. On Monday 19 March 2012, five (5) volunteers and one (1) Task Force Leader were deployed to this region of Hay and return on 25 March 2012.

In addition on Wednesday 21 March 2012 an additional 20 volunteers and one (1) Task Force Leader will deploy to the region of Hay and return to Canberra on 27 March 2012.

When our environment is so obviously and recently affected by rain and flood waters, it is easy to overlook the range of other volunteer emergency management works going on behind the scenes.

The Community Fire Unit program administered by ACT Fire and Rescue provides neighbourhoods identified at high bushfire risk with the capability to engage with emergency services to protect life and property along the urban/rural interface.

Our Community Fire Unit volunteers complement the work of ACT Fire and Rescue and the ACT Rural Fire Service in providing emergency response to nominated areas of high bushfire risk. It is about shared responsibility - together the whole community can work towards maintaining a safe and secure city.

Our CFU volunteers also engage with their local communities to identify vulnerable people (the elderly, those with poor mobility and from non-english speaking backgrounds etc) to ensure they are supported in the event of an emergency. Our CFU volunteers are provided with an accredited training course to support the ongoing safe training of members in their area of operation.

In addition, our emergency services volunteers provide numerous hours of their time to various support roles and community education events. These include but are not limited to:

1. Crowd/traffic support for major events;
2. Attendance at field days;
3. Major community events which showcase Canberra to the nation, including: Australia Day Live, Canberra Multicultural Festival, New Years Eve celebrations, Royal Canberra Show, Rally of Canberra, Summernats and Skyfire; and

4. The ACT Rural Fire Services held an Open Day in October 2011 at its Hume Helibase which provided the opportunity for members of the public to obtain up-to-date information relating to bushfire preparedness and awareness. Due to the success of this event, it will be held annually.

As Minister for Police and Emergency Services I have attended many functions, community education events and launches over the past twelve months and witnessed firsthand the commitment of our volunteers and emergency services in ensuring the community remains well informed and educated – providing the community with information about appropriate actions to assist them in keeping themselves and their properties safe and raising the profile of our emergency services to the community.

Mr Speaker, I have been impressed by the community education programs that our emergency services personnel are undertaking. Particularly some of the regular events such as the storm safe campaign, the Home Winter Safety Campaign, Farm FireWise program and Bushfire Awareness Week. Our emergency services workers and volunteers are certainly undertaking some fantastic work.

In my role as Minister for Police and Emergency Services I endeavour to meet with representatives of Emergency Services Agency Volunteers on a regular basis. These meetings are scheduled every six weeks and provide a forum to acknowledge the commitment and contribution of volunteers and to discuss any concerns raised by the volunteers.

Mr Speaker, this Government recognises the achievements of our emergency services volunteers through the provision of awards such as the Community Protection Medal as well as internal awards through each service. This Government also recognises the achievements and the importance of the invaluable work of our volunteers by providing funding to upgrade equipment, vehicles and personal protective equipment to make their service to the community as easy and comfortable as possible in the often arduous conditions that they work in.

Our volunteers are provided with training that reflects nationally developed and agreed units of competence, are provided with personal protective equipment (PPE) appropriate to the roles they undertake, including personal protective clothing, safety helmet, eye and ear protection, safety footwear, fire retardant clothing and rainwear (jacket and pants), and emotional training and support to allow them to tackle the sometimes difficult task we ask of them.

Mr Speaker, the Canberra community is extremely well serviced by these men and women, whether it is during a storm, fire or other emergency. No matter what the situation you can be sure you're in the best of hands getting the best of care. I would like to take this opportunity to pay my respects to and give my thanks for the work of our emergency services volunteers.

I commend our volunteers and thank them for the very important work that they continue to do.

I would also like to acknowledge the families and employers of our volunteers who provide support and the time to ensure our volunteers are available to respond to requests for assistance in the community's time of need. A large number of our volunteers hold down full or part-time employment or are active members of other community organisations. Without the support of families or employers and the sacrifices they make it would be difficult for our volunteers to provide the level of commitment they do.

The ACTSES consists of just 198 volunteers with an additional 23 new recruits inducted on Sunday 18 March 2012. Our volunteers come from all walks of life - they are school students, university students, the self employed, public servants, private enterprise employees and retirees. During storm events such as that we have just experienced, many of our volunteers finish their normal jobs at 5pm put on their orange uniforms and respond to the ACT community's requests for assistance until 2 or 3 in the morning, then go back to their normal places of work at 8am.

In order to be able to respond effectively, it must also be recognised that the ACTSES volunteers give up a lot of time to train. The training required involves numerous weekends and at least one evening a week. Even in training we can see the wonderful caring nature of the volunteer, as a majority of training is provided in kind by other more senior volunteers who hold appropriate training and assessment qualifications. While this in-kind contribution cannot be accurately quantified, it is yet another example of the invaluable commitment of our volunteers.

Although this recent event has focused the community's attention again on the efforts of our ACTSES volunteers, the ACT Government has long maintained a strong commitment to the four volunteer arms of the emergency services that reach out and assist our community.

Given the enormous commitment of our volunteers, the Government does do all it can to acknowledge this commitment. This Government supports our volunteers through the provision of training, the provision of appropriate facilities and equipment and through the provision of organisational and emotional support.

Our volunteers are an incredible group of people who selflessly sacrifice a great deal of time and put their own safety at risk for the good of the community and I am very proud of them. They represent the best in our society.

Our volunteers deserve this acknowledgement because they do what they do not for public acclaim but instead because they believe in the importance of supporting our community and giving what and where they can.