

# Cross-border response and resource management

Paul Considine, AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre

The AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre provides and coordinates international emergency management assistance and builds relationships between fire management communities.

The modern history of formal interstate resource sharing<sup>1</sup> dates back to 1994, when fire services across Australia contributed resources to combat fires in New South Wales. Since then, there have been many occasions when resources have been deployed across state boundaries including, the Sydney hailstorm in 1999, the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 and the Queensland floods and Cyclone Yasi in 2011. Additionally, international resources have come to Australia from New Zealand, Canada and the United States and Australia has sent resources overseas when requested.

The Australian Government has plans in place such as COMDISPLAN and AUSASSISTPLAN to manage national and international emergency and disaster situations. These are regularly used to help Australian jurisdictions deal with significant events. State and territory fire and emergency services organisations have however, shouldered the bulk of the responsibility for administering fire and emergency service resource movements; initially communicating among themselves and, more recently, through the AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre.

The Australian Government has endorsed an arrangement whereby international calls for wildfire management assistance can be made directly from the United States and Canada to the AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre in Australia. This model for providing international emergency management assistance is built on many years of professional collaboration between the respective countries' bushfire management communities.

The way in which we share interstate and international resource requests is becoming increasingly important as we experience longer fire seasons and potentially more extreme storm and cyclone events. In the past decade, Tasmania has had three significant fire seasons, which it could not have managed without calling on interstate and New Zealand resources. The fires in Queensland at the end of 2018 were unprecedented and required significant interstate assistance to control. Overseas, British Columbia is regularly seeking international assistance as its own resources become depleted and other Canadian jurisdictions have exceeded their capacity to help.

AFAC recently hosted Serge Poulin from the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC). CIFFC has been operating for 35 years meeting the need for Canadian jurisdictions to share resources efficiently and

effectively, and promote national situational awareness. Mr Poulin provided constructive feedback on our operations and on streamlining current arrangements with Canada.

The most significant message to come out of Mr Poulin's visit is that the AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre is on the same journey that CIFFC has been on for the past three and a half decades and is likely to evolve in a similar way, because that is what adds most value to the participants in resource sharing. Developments the AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre may see include:

- standardisation of resource typology, leading to more efficient requests and supply
- resource requests being brokered through the AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre, simplifying planning and improving national situational awareness
- flat rates for cost recovery for resources to simplify and speed up invoicing
- a national system of preparedness levels to create clearly defined trigger points for the use of international resources from New Zealand and further afield.

If the future holds longer, more intense operational seasons, then resource sharing across state and national boundaries will be the most cost-effective and practical way of managing resources. Smaller states and territories may simply be unable to afford to maintain emergency response resources to the extent of the risk potential they face, and even larger jurisdictions can expect to run up against resource constraints in their worst operational seasons.

The implication of this is that state and territory fire and emergency services agencies need to cede a measure of autonomy to make a national system work. The AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre has demonstrated that this is achievable. If we compare the arrangements we have in place today to the arrangements in place ten years ago (or even back in 1994) we can see the progress to a mature industry model of national and international cooperation in resource sharing. We must build on and maintain that momentum now: in more ways than one, we cannot afford not to.

<sup>1</sup> Beyond the 'closest resource' response that has been going on at a local level across state borders for decades.