

Agreement in Principle

Mr STEVE WHAN (Monaro—Minister for Emergency Services, and Minister for Small Business) [12.52 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

The State Emergency Service Amendment Bill 2009 provides additional legislative recognition of the responsibilities of one of this State's most valuable emergency services and provides for its ongoing structural reform. All members would remember the chilling images that flashed around the world following the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004. We had not seen a disaster of that magnitude anywhere in the world in modern times. The toll of dead and missing is estimated at more than 200,000 people. Our thoughts and condolences go to the victims, their families and the countless others still suffering in its aftermath. This terrible event was a wake-up call for the international community. In Australia it gave a new impetus to the need for a national tsunami warning system.

The Joint Australian Tsunami Warning Centre, operated by Geoscience Australia and the Bureau of Meteorology, now provides around-the-clock seismic monitoring and tsunami detection specifically for Australia. In New South Wales the State Emergency Service was designated as the combat agency responsible for tsunami, in a logical extension of its expertise in flood planning and response. The service was responsible for the development of the New South Wales tsunami plan—a sub-plan of the New South Wales Disaster Plan—and has been a consistent and committed participant in the Australian Emergency Management Committee's Australian Tsunami Working Group. As a result of the organisation's efforts, tsunami planning in this State is now well advanced in comparison with many other jurisdictions.

The essence of the New South Wales tsunami plan—which was endorsed by the State Emergency Management Committee in late 2005—is to provide for the coordinated warning and, where necessary, evacuation of people in low-lying coastal areas of New South Wales and Lord Howe Island. It has since been updated to reflect the links between the State Emergency Service and the Joint Australian Tsunami Warning Centre. Under the plan the roles and responsibilities of the State Emergency Service in tsunami preparedness, response and recovery include leading the development of tsunami warning systems in New South Wales, providing safety advice to include in New South Wales tsunami warnings issued by the Bureau of Meteorology, developing tsunami education programs, ensuring that State Emergency Service personnel are appropriately trained, controlling tsunami response operations, directing the dissemination of tsunami warnings and watches at regional and local levels, directing the evacuation of people or communities at risk of inundation, coordinating flood rescue operations and resupply to isolated communities, providing immediate welfare support to evacuees, and participating in recovery committees as required.

The April 2007 Solomon Islands tsunami, which, thankfully, had a negligible impact on our coastline, was the first opportunity to test this plan to any degree and showed the importance of being prepared. The State Emergency Service worked in concert with the Bureau of Meteorology to provide timely advice for maritime authorities and coastal communities. State Emergency Service volunteers in coastal regions were placed on high alert; the service worked closely with Surf Life Saving Australia and the maritime rescue agencies to ensure they had timely information and they were prepared to assist with any required response operation. The State Emergency Service continues to work with other government agencies and our community to increase tsunami awareness and preparedness.

Working with the Commonwealth Government, the State Emergency Service has provided a series of briefings to representatives of our other emergency services, government and non-government agencies, and local government over the past four years as part of the Australian Tsunami Warning System project. This included a series of eight briefings and planning exercises in March and April this year in conjunction with the bureau and the Department of Environment and Climate Change, updating similar events in 2007. The service continues also to test and exercise its capabilities in this area. As recently as this week, personnel have continued to refine their operations and procedures. The staff and volunteers of the State Emergency Service are well known for their hard work, dedication and commitment to the people of this State.

Their efforts will be crucial to the safety and wellbeing of New South Wales' coastal communities either under immediate threat of or actually impacted by a tsunami. It is clear that the service's role as the lead combat agency for tsunami planning and response should be detailed in legislation, along with its responsibilities in respect to floods, storms, and the protection of life and property. The bill amends the State Emergency Service Act to reflect this major combat responsibility. The second amendment contained in this bill is the move to bring the leadership of the State Emergency Service in line with our other emergency services by replacing the title of "Director General" with that of "Commissioner". This will also apply to the rank of "Deputy". This rank and title structure is aligned with our other emergency services, such as New South Wales Fire Brigades and the New South Wales Rural Fire Service.

It also echoes the changes introduced in amendments to the State Emergency Service Act in 2005 when the State Emergency Service operational divisions were renamed as regions, consistent with the organisational arrangements of other emergency services such as the New South Wales Police Force, the New South Wales Ambulance Service, New South Wales Fire Brigades and the New South Wales Rural Fire Service with the Australian Interagency Incident Management System—Incident Control System. This new title for the head of the organisation will provide similar consistency across our emergency services and make clear the equivalence and standing of the service.

The third amendment outlined in the bill is in relation to the role of State Emergency Service local and unit controllers or their deputies. Currently, no employment caveats are applied to these appointments. However, it is worth noting that the Rural Fires Act 1997 establishes a limitation under which elected local government councillors, as defined by the Local Government Act 1993, cannot be appointed as fire control officers; nor can their deputies be appointed to the level equivalent to State Emergency Service local and unit controllers and their deputies. This limitation is now to be applied in the State Emergency Service as well.

Local government is a strong and committed supporter of the State Emergency Service, with local councils responsible under the Act for the provision of accommodation and vehicles for their local State Emergency Service units. The new funding model for the State Emergency Service, as detailed in the State Revenue and Other Legislation Amendment (Budget Measures) Bill 2008, now means that local government contributes to the overall funding of the State Emergency Service, as it has to the funding of our fire services, along with the insurance industry and the State Government.

This change means that the service's relationship with councils requires a higher degree of transparency and separation of powers. As a result, elected councillors will not be eligible to be appointed as local controllers, unit controllers or their deputies. Any local or unit controller or deputy who is elected to a local council will cease his or her role as a State Emergency Service controller or deputy on a date three months after their election takes effect. However, I should point that this will not affect existing controllers who currently are councillors. Only people appointed from this point onwards will be affected.

This amending bill will ensure that transparency and probity are addressed and, again, is consistent with the State's other major volunteer agency, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service. The bill introduces timely and relevant reforms for one of this State's most valued, reliable and efficient emergency services. Last night in this place some time was spent thanking State Emergency Service volunteers and highlighting the impact they have in helping out our community. This bill re-emphasises the importance of the State Emergency Service to New South Wales. I commend the bill to the House.