

Agreement in Principle

Dr ANDREW McDONALD (Macquarie Fields—Parliamentary Secretary) [10.56 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

I introduce a bill to amend the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989. As members are no doubt aware, the Act provides the legislative foundation for the overall coordination of disasters and emergencies across New South Wales. The main purpose of the Act is to establish the emergency bodies and plans to guide the State and the Government in the management of emergencies and disasters. The key body is the State Emergency Management Committee, the SEMC, which is responsible for coordinated planning and policy development for emergency management in New South Wales. As you would expect from our peak emergency body, the State Emergency Management Committee comprises the most skilled, experienced and recognised emergency officials in this State.

The committee includes the heads or other senior executive officers from each of our emergency services—the NSW Police Force, NSW Fire Brigades, the Rural Fire Service, the State Emergency Service, the Ambulance Service of New South Wales, and the Volunteer Rescue Association, along with other relevant agencies—the Department of Human Services within Community Services, Transport NSW, NSW Health, Industry and Investment NSW, the Department of Premier and Cabinet, New South Wales Maritime, Treasury, and the Department of Services, Technology and Administration. These experts are responsible for the development and maintenance of the principal guiding emergency plan—the State Disaster Plan, or Displan—which sets out the arrangements for the cohesive, coordinated response by all relevant services and supporting agencies in the event of an emergency.

The positions of two of the State's most important emergency officials are also established under the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act: the State Emergency Operations Controller—or SEOCon—and the State Emergency Recovery Controller—or SERCon. The State Emergency Operations Controller's role is to coordinate support to combat agencies—such as NSW Police, Fire Brigades, the Rural Fire Service or the State Emergency Service—during emergency response operations and to control the response for events for which there is no designated combat agency. The State Emergency Recovery Controller's role is to oversee the planning for, and management of, emergency recovery in New South Wales, helping communities battered by natural disasters or other emergencies to return to normal. The amendments outlined in this bill will ensure that the Act reflects contemporary emergency management policy and practices and supports our emergency services in meeting the challenges that may lie ahead.

The devastating Victorian bushfires of 2009 destroyed whole communities and cost 170 lives. Thankfully, New South Wales has not been tested with a disaster on this scale but, with a changing climate, we must be prepared for the risk of such an event to increase. In recognition of this risk and to reflect on what could be learned from the Victorian experience, the State Emergency Management Committee commissioned a strategic review of the State Emergency and Rescue Act. This review provided a number of clear insights into how the Act could be refocused and updated in alignment with ever-developing best practice emergency management arrangements. The bill before the House now implements the key recommendations of this review in relation to the core roles and responsibilities of the State Emergency Management Committee, the appointment of members and other emergency management officials, and practical expert assistance to members of the New South Wales Police Force in emergency situations. It also includes a number of administrative and consequential amendments.

The bill clarifies that the Minister for Emergency Services of the day can appoint either an independent or an agency official as the chair of the State Emergency Management Committee, and ensures that the committee's strategic policy roles and responsibilities are in keeping with current emergency management practices. It also clarifies the ex officio nature of the positions of the State Emergency Operations Controller and the State Emergency Recovery Controller and the respective deputy controller positions. This includes streamlining the appointment processes and clarifying the roles of State, district and local emergency operations controllers in providing support to combat agencies during emergency response operations. The new appointment process—by position, rather than by individual—removes the necessity for a cumbersome administrative appointment process in the event of casual vacancies when the office holder is, for example, on leave. Importantly, the Act enables police officers to be aided or accompanied by assistants when taking safety measures in danger areas affected by an emergency. This is a welcome advance for community safety during emergencies, allowing, for example, an officer to be accompanied by an electrician to turn off power in a danger area.

The bill refreshes the roles and responsibilities of the State Emergency Management Committee, especially by ensuring that it is not replicating duties that have over time been overtaken by developing technology or increased combat agency participation. These include the emergence of the new emergency alert warning system, which sends warning messages directly to the landlines and mobile phones of people in the path of potential danger, and new community bushfire alert and warning systems introduced in the wake of the Victorian

bushfires. These sophisticated warning systems and the numerous advantages of technology not dreamt of at the time of the Act's creation in 1989 obviate State Emergency Management Committee participation in these vital communications activities. By concentrating the State Emergency Management Committee's core function on ensuring the highest level of efficient interagency coordination and strategic policy development, these amendments remove the risk of confusion and duplication in operational decision-making best left to individual combat agencies with the requisite resources and expertise.

The bill also includes a number of further miscellaneous improvements to administrative processes associated with the State's emergency management arrangements. These improvements include simple steps to enhance the timely distribution of State Disaster Plan updates, and enabling the State Emergency Management Committee annual report to be tabled out of the parliamentary session so it is publicly available as soon as possible rather than waiting for the Parliament to resume sitting. A number of other minor administrative or consequential amendments also are included, ensuring that other sections of the Act reflect current practice.

These include ensuring that the chair of each local emergency management committee represents that local area on the respective district emergency management committee and assigning ambulance officers of the rank of station officer or above the same authority as their counterparts in other emergency services in the case of a declared state of emergency. These amendments, as I have outlined to House, are designed to enhance and streamline the State Emergency and Rescue Management Amendment Act. They have been fully endorsed by the State Emergency Management Committee after consultation with relevant stakeholders. I commend the bill to the House.