

Agreement in Principle

Mr PHIL KOPERBERG (Blue Mountains—Parliamentary Secretary) [10.14 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

The Government is today introducing the State Emergency and Rescue Management Amendment Bill 2009 to improve and streamline emergency recovery arrangements in this State. This is a particularly timely reform, as northern New South Wales counts the cost of severe flooding that has caused widespread damage and hardship throughout the region. Family homes, businesses and vast areas of farmland were inundated, communities isolated, tourism, fishing and other industries set back, and vital infrastructure, including roads and bridges, was damaged and, in some cases, destroyed. Many people are suffering hardship as a result.

The Government declared a natural disaster in 14 local government areas to ensure assistance could start flowing as quickly as possible to those in need. These riverside communities are resilient and well prepared for flooding but it is obvious that recovering from such a large-scale natural disaster will take considerable time and extensive government support. I want again to assure these communities that this Government is working hard to help them to return to normal as quickly as possible, with the new arrangements outlined in this bill already being applied under a coordinated, cohesive recovery operation.

Four one-stop shop disaster recovery centres are operating at Lismore, Grafton, Kempsey and Coffs Harbour to provide assistance and support to people in need. A range of government agencies, councils and welfare services is staffing these centres. These staff are doing an excellent job providing residents, business people, primary producers and others with advice and much-needed emotional support. As we are seeing in the State's north, the process of helping a community to recover from a devastating natural disaster such as a flood, storm, bushfire or other emergency requires a sustained and coordinated effort. While a structured recovery process may begin in parallel with a response operation, it will inevitably finish weeks, months or even years after the response operation winds up. The process needs to be guided to ensure communities can return as soon as possible to where they were before the emergency or, preferably, to develop and become more resilient—in other words, to build back better.

The State Government takes a leading role in that process, as we have seen in the aftermath of numerous natural disasters such as the Central Coast floods and storms, the western Sydney hailstorm in 2007, the North Coast floods of 2001 and the Sydney hailstorm in 1999. This usually starts with the establishment of a disaster recovery committee and a one-stop shop. As we saw at Blacktown, the recovery process can also involve bringing together key players, such as the building industry, materials suppliers and the insurance industry, to clear away obstacles that might slow down the progress of rebuilding or repairs. It is not just about physical rebuilding but can also involve working to help local industries such as tourism and primary production and regional economies to get back on their feet.

The State's emergency response arrangements and responsibilities are long standing, well understood and documented in detail in the State Disaster Plan and its supporting sub-plans. However, there are no parallel guidelines or assigned responsibilities for recovery processes. Responsibility for recovery planning and management has been diffused across different organisations and committees, with no clear lines of accountability or chains of command. This bill amends the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act to address this issue. It defines for the first time a State official who is responsible for emergency recovery and, in doing so, streamlines and formalises our existing mechanisms for providing government support to communities battered by disaster. These clear lines of accountability and processes are essential to ensure that recovery support is provided in a coordinated and consistent manner, rather than as an ad hoc response to each individual disaster.

The amendments create two new statutory positions, the State Emergency Recovery Controller, known henceforth as SERCon, and the Deputy State Emergency Recovery Controller. The SERCon, appointed by the Minister for Emergency Services, is to be an existing member of the New South Wales Senior Executive Service with experience in emergency management. The Deputy SERCon is to be an existing member of the Senior Executive Service or senior officer, also with emergency management experience. The SERCon is equivalent to the position of the State Emergency Operations Controller, as defined in the Act, who has responsibility for emergency response operations in the event there is no single combat agency with designated responsibility.

Reflecting the importance of the recovery phase of an emergency, the SERCon also will become a member of the State Disaster Council and the State Emergency Management Committee. The SERCon's primary roles are to create a sustainable emergency recovery capability for New South Wales, and to control the recovery from an emergency that affects more than one district or for which he or she assumes responsibility. In essence, the officer, with the support of personnel in Emergency Management New South Wales, formerly the Office for Emergency Services, will be responsible for planning and preparing for emergency recovery operations and for

overseeing efforts to return a community to normality in the aftermath of an emergency. The SERCon will bring together the relevant government agencies and organisations to ensure the necessary services and assistance are provided in a coordinated and timely manner.

As well as having the power to engage State government agencies as required, the SERCon also will liaise with industry, non-government organisations and local and Commonwealth governments, as needed, to address issues that arise. For instance, this could include helping source grants for non-profit organisations, alternative supplies of building materials once local stocks are depleted, compiling registers of qualified tradespeople or identifying sources of feed for primary producers if their feedstock is burnt or flooded. A key part of this process will involve establishing and controlling a State recovery coordination centre during recovery operations to gather, analyse and disseminate information about the recovery process to stakeholders and the wider community.

The new arrangements to be spelt out in the State Disaster Plan also formalise the position of Emergency Recovery Coordinator. In a prolonged recovery operation, the SERCon can recommend to the Minister the appointment of a State Recovery Coordinator to lead the day-to-day, on-the-ground work with the community. At this point I place on the record the Government's thanks to former New South Wales Police Commissioner, Ken Moroney, for the tremendous work to assist flood victims since his appointment as the Northern New South Wales Flood Recovery Coordinator. Mr Moroney is held in high esteem and affection by the people of this State for his decades of service to the New South Wales Police Force and our community, and is providing a valuable support to those affected by the floods and also those working on the recovery task.

Currently Mr Moroney is based in Coffs Harbour, working with government agencies, councils and other stakeholders to help iron out practical problems along the region's road to recovery. Both the recovery controller and coordinator will work with recovery committees, which can comprise representatives of relevant government agencies, local government, community and welfare organisations, and private sector industry groups, such as the building and insurance industries. Those recovery committees are vital in bringing local knowledge, experience and expertise to the recovery process and I thank also the representatives of councils and other bodies that have joined the four recovery committees established in the wake of those floods.

The legislative amendments introduced today will be reflected in amendments to detail the new recovery arrangements in the New South Wales State Disaster Plan [Displan] and its subordinate plans. Those reforms will ensure that communities devastated by natural disasters and other emergencies continue to receive the full cooperation and support of government and other agencies to overcome the damage and hardship they may have suffered. They have this Government's commitment that it will work hard to support them every step of the way and now we have the legislative framework to determine the precise mechanisms and processes by which this support will be provided.

This formalised recovery process is a sensible, far-reaching reform that will have enormous benefits for communities that have the misfortune of falling victim to nature's wrath or other emergencies. We may not be able to prevent natural disasters but in their aftermath we will be there to help pick up the pieces, restore damage and return a community's lifestyle, economic lifeblood and living standards as swiftly, efficiently and effectively as possible. I commend the bill to the House.