



**SES Volunteers  
Association of WA (Inc)**  
*One Association - Many Values*



# 2022-23 MAJOR SES DEPLOYMENTS DEBRIEF

Report of the online review meeting of all WA SES units on 23 February 2023  
convened by the SESVA

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# State Emergency Service Volunteers Association of Western Australia

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Albany SES	Donnybrook SES	Mundaring SES
Armadale SES	Esperance SES	Pingelly SES
Australind SES	Geraldton-Greenough SES	Rockingham-Kwinana Serpentine-Jarrahdale SES
Bayswater SES	Gosnells SES	Stirling SES
Belmont SES	Kalamunda SES	SWORD SES
Broome SES	Kalbarri SES	Wagin SES
Bunbury SES	Karratha SES	Walpole SES
Canning-South Perth SES	Mandurah SES	Wanneroo-Joondalup SES
Cockburn SES	Margaret River SES	
Denmark SES		

The State Emergency Service Volunteers Association of Western Australia (SESVA-WA) would also like to thank the participants in its online feedback meeting held on 23 February 2023, and those who provided written submissions.



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## Purpose

The purpose of this review is to identify learnings provided by the WA SES volunteers that they believe may improve the volunteering experience of SES volunteers when deploying to future natural hazards incidents, both intrastate and interstate.

The SESVA-WA aims to provide an evidence-based review of the experiences of SES volunteers. The outcomes of the review were derived directly from the volunteers who deployed.

## Scope

The scope of this review covers deployments to New South Wales in September and October 2022, and to the Kimberley region of WA in January and February 2023.

## Methodology

The SESVA-WA convened an online review meeting of all WA SES units on 23 February 2023 at which there were 43 participants. The participants were either local managers or delegates, many of whom had been on flood incident deployments. Prior to the review meeting, the participants were also asked to canvass feedback from their unit members who had deployed on flood incident deployments. The meeting was recorded for the purpose of preparing an unedited transcript. Written submissions and other related correspondence were also reviewed.

This considerable amount of information was then analysed to identify the recurring feedback themes within the scope of this review. These themes are supported by the stories that volunteers shared but are not reproduced here for brevity and to avoid identifying persons involved in the specific incident(s). A brief description of each theme has also been provided to assist with understanding and context.

A draft of this review was circulated to SES unit managers for feedback before the review was finalised.

From the common themes distilled and described herein, there are specific recommendations that volunteers would like considered for implementation for future deployments. Some recommendations are procedural, whilst others require an organisation-wide cultural paradigm shift.

## Approval

In the interests of improving the service of the SES to the community, this review has been approved by the committee of management of the SESVA-WA for wide and unrestricted dissemination.



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## President's Foreword

The role of the SES Volunteers Association to ensure that the collective voice of the volunteers is disseminated to those that can make a difference for the communities within Western Australia.

The organised and collective community service capability of the State Emergency Service, is on many occasions reflective of the “only if we were” syndrome. The WA Government itself is concerned about how they can respond to climate change and the emergency needs of its communities.

A recent DFES report highlighted the need to expand its expertise in managing this type of operation. The Association acknowledges the DFES's expertise with fire but a community impact from a natural hazard is not of the same nature. It is what the SES is for and has trained for since its inception.

The Association hopes that through the facilitation of operational debriefs with its volunteers, we can continue to contribute to refining DFESs' needs. Many volunteers ask the Association why they are not involved in extensive reviews with the DFES. From the Management Committee of the Association, we cannot explain why the thoughts and observations of its trained members are not captured by the DFES in reviewing its response capabilities.

The Association also expresses concern that DFES reviews consistently highlighted opportunities for operational improvements; but what about addressing those missed opportunities by applying the traditional and proven cycle of:

- Prevention;
- Preparation;
- Response; and
- Recovery.

The notion that the community-based SES Units are just volunteers and not as capable as DFES-paid workers concern us. Are we to allow our communities to drift to reliance on the service of a few DFES workers? Should we change direction and empower communities to build resilience into the future?

As an Association, we sincerely believe that communities and emergency service workers, paid and unpaid (volunteers), are the keys to empowering communities and creating the higher levels of resilience and capability that will be required in the future.

**Greg Cook**



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## Executive Summary

The following feedback themes have been provided by the SES volunteers.

Pre-deployment administration must be timely, accurate and coordinated with a properly considered detailed operational plan

Requests for expressions of interest (EOI) for deployments are biased in favour of metropolitan units and often at short notice, even when a flood incident has been in progress for several weeks. Incident deployment orders and airline details were last minute, details are inaccurate or missing, and roles were ill-defined or inaccurate. For much of the time, there was a lack of communication and coordination between SOC, ROC, and divisional headquarters (Fitzroy Crossing). The same was experienced between the jurisdictional liaison officer (JLO) and task forces deployed to NSW.

Natural hazards incident planning and execution require alternative planning, contingency planning, and innovative solutions

Volunteers arrived on site without clear orders or plans from the incident management team (IMT) or divisional staff. No equipment for the tasks was considered or provided prior to the SES team's arrival. Planning appeared to be ill-conceived, haphazard, or last minute. IMT staff were under stress and possibly in roles simply to fill the role rather than being competent for the role. The IMT did not leverage the skills and knowledge of SES volunteers, many of whom had recent deployment experience in NSW.

Logistic efforts must be planned, and stress tested for possible changes

Volunteers were arriving in the incident region unexpectedly. Handovers were largely not possible due to inbound and outbound travel arrangements not being coordinated. Forward camp set up at Derby had to be abandoned. Accommodation and meals were often last-minute arrangements or not satisfactorily communicated. Dietary requirements were often not complied with and variety lacking.

SES volunteers were underutilised and undervalued

Volunteers were largely used as cleaners. Pre-deployment requests for EOI asked for skilled and trained operators in storm and water damage operations and incident management but were eventually not employed in the roles requested. This is to be contrasted with the welcome opportunity of some SES volunteers to work with DFES USAR (Urban Search and Rescue) teams who reported a good working experience. SES volunteers developed familiarity with rapid damage assessments (RDA) in NSW that would have been easily transferable to WA operations.



## Incident Outlines

### NSW Floods (July- November 2022)

Heavy flooding was experienced in Central Coast and Sydney areas of New South Wales beginning in early July 2022. Around 85,000 people were displaced by the flooding or requested to leave their homes by authorities. Flood damage was significant because rain fell on land that was already saturated after months of previous heavy rainfall. It was the third major flood in 2022 for some areas. Much of New South Wales was declared a natural disaster.

NSW SES issued over 3,960 warnings and responded to almost 27,000 requests for assistance from the public. These included more than 960 flood rescues, the distribution of two million sandbags, and more than 1,000 resupply missions to isolated communities.

The flood event claimed the lives of seven (7) people. Thousands of livestock, crops, pets, properties, and businesses were also lost. 157 homes were destroyed and 2,816 homes were left uninhabitable.

Western Australia responded with many DFES staff and volunteers over multiple task forces working across NSW from August to November 2022

### Ex-TC Ellie (January 2023)

Ex-TC Ellie created widespread flooding and damage in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, from Derby in the west to Fitzroy Crossing in the east and north to Kununurra and Kalumburu. Unlike most tropical lows that move inland, ex-TC Ellie turned west from Northern Territory and headed over the Kimberley. The rain gauge near Fitzroy Crossing measured 831 mm of rain over seven days.

This incessant rain and an associated monsoon trough resulted in widespread flooding and road closures along the Fitzroy River. At Fitzroy Crossing, the river rose to 15.81 metres (the previous record was 13.95 metres in 2002). Three kilometres of highway between Broome and Derby have washed away, as was the Fitzroy Crossing bridge. The highway is the only all-weather sealed road between Broome, Derby, and Kununurra. Many communities were affected, as were local businesses, service providers, and Government departments.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Service acted as the lead agency for initial response and recovery. Support was provided by DFES and other government staff, WA SES volunteers, the Department of Defence, and NSW SES, to name a few.



## Specific Lessons Identified by WA SES Volunteers

Pre-deployment administration must be timely, accurate and coordinated with a properly considered detailed operational plan.

Deployment Register should form the source for all pre-approved volunteers for Level 2/3 deployments outside their region

There were many examples of volunteers being asked for details that have already been collected by DFES. This information is available from the Volunteer Hub as well as the Natural Hazards Deployment Register, the latter being refreshed in September/October annually.

Volunteers must be pre-approved by their Local Manager for deployment

The DFES put out calls for EOI for deployment to units similar to Level 1 incidents notwithstanding DFES already has a register of volunteers endorsed for deployment (the Natural Hazards Deployment Register). There were examples of where volunteers were not suited or approved by unit management for deployment. DFES must crosscheck EOI against its own Natural Hazards Deployment Register.

Volunteers may only be deployed with unit knowledge

Volunteers were deployed without knowledge of the SES unit's local manager. DFES's authority extends only to general responsibility for SES units, not volunteers. It follows that DFES must inform units when volunteers are deployed outside SES unit control.

Deployment information needs to be accurate

Volunteers experienced movement orders that were inaccurate or incomplete. This was especially problematic for country units. There was evidence that deployment orders were cut and pasted incorrectly. DFES staff require a better appreciation for and understanding of the flow on effects of their movement orders.

Calls for deployment should be timely and with the maximum notice possible

Volunteers have lives beyond volunteering. If a call for EOI to deploy for a major incident is received, volunteers must coordinate with family, work, and other commitments. Likewise, when an EOI is submitted, volunteers need to know that they are selected for deployment with prompt notice. The earliest opportunity should be within 24 hours after the EOI deadline.

Deployments must be planned

Volunteers have repeatedly been deployed, only to be told they were not expected. Volunteers also experienced arriving to be told there isn't anything for them to do. Likewise, the departure of volunteers from the incident appeared haphazard or incomplete. Details



about when and where to be were sometimes unconfirmed until the last minute. On the contrary, some volunteers were leaving the incident area at the end of the travel day.

This demonstrates a lack of understanding that volunteers have put their other commitments, especially paid employment, on hold to assist the community. Many volunteers forego pay or leave to provide their service without pay. Deployment arrangements of volunteers need to be efficient and timely.



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## Natural hazards incident planning and execution requires alternative planning, contingency planning and innovative solutions

SES Volunteers on deployment expect to be commanded by and administered by a suitably experienced DFES staff member for the duration of their deployment

This recommendation has been implemented substantially by DFES for many years. However lapses have resulted in very poor outcomes for volunteers and reflected poorly on the reputation of the DFES among SES volunteers.

The quality of task force leadership is important. SES volunteers were left with the impression that the DFES staff were appointed solely on availability.

Task force members must not be separated without suitable support and command arrangements

There were instances where some task force members were required to stay back to support the IMT whilst the task force leader and other task force members were in Broome. This led to individual volunteers in Broome experiencing overwork and distress. In NSW, SES volunteers were deployed to remote towns with limited command arrangements.

SES deployments should be preceded by an SES advance party

The early stages of level 3 incidents inherently involve many unknowns. As expressed later, SES volunteers have expectations that accommodation, meals, and operational tasking are in place before they arrive on site commensurate with the maturity of the incident response.

A team of five experienced volunteers should be deployed in advance with the role of supporting the IMT decision cycle and taking initial administrative command and control of SES volunteers arriving at the staging area. Once the situation is stabilised or a clear need for additional volunteer resources is required, then commit as the circumstances indicate.

Experience also shows that volunteers are generally not administered the same level of care as staff, and do not have the same public service or unionised conditions of employment. Volunteers, therefore, feel treated as second-class employees. The SES motto is "We Serve". However, volunteers feel treated as servants.

SES volunteers should have either IMT roles commensurate with their skills and experience, or at least assist DFES staff in IMT roles in circumstances of natural hazards incidents

There are numerous instances on deployments where there is demonstrable camaraderie between the different services when working in the field. This same goodwill and mutual respect should be developed for IMT staff, whatever this service, whether volunteer or staff, so as to team build, both in training and on operations. The exclusion of suitably



experienced volunteers from the IMT or forward control point (FCP) is an opportunity lost by DFES.

The lack of recognition of the skills and knowledge that volunteers bring to the DFES from their workplaces is noted. There is a predisposition for DFES staff to “fudge it” rather than reach out to volunteers who do those same required roles in their workplaces.

#### Use proprietary mobile telephone applications

The ability of SES volunteers to access compatible communication and information systems was demonstrated during the NSW deployments. However, SES volunteers have no access to the DFES WebEOC. SES task forces for the Kimberley deployments quickly established WhatsApp chat groups to communicate within themselves.

#### DFES RDA reporting incompatible with Natural Hazards RFA

These databases do not communicate with each other and have separate purposes. Even a simple location in Natural Hazards RFA becomes impossible because it works on street addresses only. Street addresses are not necessarily present in remote areas. The RDA system relies on latitude and longitude. SES volunteers assisted the DFES USAR teams and found the RDA system easy to use, much the same as the NSW ArcGIS Collector application.

#### There needs to be one mobile phone number for community members to contact SES/IMT

This was a particular problem in NSW where volunteers were working away from the IMT or the IMT had no telephonist. The same was experienced in Kimberley. A dedicated DFES mobile phone number for each divisional HQ would have been an advantage. The universal 132500 phone number is designed to collect requests for assistance and is not an incident communications tool.



## Logistic efforts must be planned and stress tested for possible changes

### SES Deployments must be self-supporting

Volunteers experienced shortages of suitable accommodation, food, transport and equipment. Whilst many of the experiences of volunteers were short term, it is clear that the logistics system was not sufficiently robust to provide for volunteers as well as DFES staff.

Furthermore, where communities are already damaged or destroyed, the addition of more personnel to accommodate and feed exacerbates the problem. Therefore, future SES task forces need their own welfare and medical capability which goes with them.

### Laundry facilities are essential

Volunteers are recommended to deploy two sets of PPC. After long days in the field, often sweaty, muddy, and contaminated clothing requires laundering before wearing again. This was not always achievable if the volunteers return to their accommodation after the accommodation on-site laundry is closed. In NSW, a laundry was provided where camps were established. In WA, the provision of a laundry service was spontaneously organised and administered by the volunteers.

### SES PPC unsuitable for hot and humid conditions

Volunteers found their orange overalls or two-piece PPC to be very hot in the Kimberley. A lighter PPC is proposed.

### Airport pickups require a point of contact (POC)

Volunteer leaders and bus drivers need to have their POC name and mobile number. Too often the SES volunteers were given one instruction and the bus driver was given another. This wasted time and contributed to inefficiencies. Volunteers are known to no longer volunteer for this task because of the wasted time experienced.

### SES Deployment bags must be fit for purpose

There was no consistency with travel/duffle bags used by SES volunteers on deployment. Not all SES volunteers are offered the DFES-approved bag. There are options offered to USAR personnel with wheels that are hardy enough for travel.

SES volunteers approved for inclusion in the Deployment Register should be permitted to issue a USAR-type travel bag.



## SES volunteers were underutilised and undervalued

### WA SES volunteers should command and administer WA SES volunteers

The appointment of DFES staff as task force leaders work most times. However task force leaders work with the DFES's administrative command structure, and this puts the welfare of SES volunteers second.

WA SES volunteers noted that DFES included NSW SES in IMTs to the exclusion of suitable and available WA SES volunteers. WA SES volunteers also experienced being spoken down to. Whatever the rationale, the WA SES volunteers experienced disappointment and humiliation.

At the very least, there needs to be a single higher-level SES volunteer liaison officer in the SOC and at every level down to the forward control point (FCP) to ensure the welfare of volunteers and to minimise any negative operational impacts. This extends to managing and maintaining a consistent and informed information flow from higher to lower command levels and vice versa.

### Volunteers should have freedom of choice to participate in non-operational activities

Volunteers report being coerced to participate in multiple non-operational activities under threat of being stood down (removed) from deployment. Threats of removal should be a last resort for management and should only be considered after all possible other management options for an individual are exhausted. Threats are contrary to the DFES Code of Conduct policy "...to establish a safe and healthy workplace and culture."

### Fatigue management must be applied equally

Fatigue management of volunteers was largely left to the individual volunteer where there was not an appropriate SES volunteer or DFES staff monitoring fatigue. Twelve-hour days became 15-hour days. The appointment of team leaders for NSW deployments worked well to manage fatigue but was lacking for the Kimberley deployments. For the most part, volunteers organised themselves into teams with team leaders and deputy team leaders and managed fatigue at the team level. There was a general breakdown of fatigue management at the task force level.

### Deployments must offer meaningful employment

Many of the pre-deployment calls for EOI included minimum qualification prerequisites, such as storm and water damage operations, and chainsaw operator. These prerequisites exclude many of the volunteers who would otherwise be available. Recent experience shows that volunteers only need to be fit to undertake cleaning duties. Therefore, volunteers only needed SES induction to undertake these tasks. That is not to say that experienced and trained volunteers are not required from time to time or should not be requested, but a mix of skill sets is desirable.



### SES Volunteers require fixed-wing and rotary-wing aviation familiarisation

The NSW floods were the first time in many years to have regular exposure and employment in and around fixed and rotary-wing aircraft. The Kimberley flood was an opportunity for some volunteers to ride in rotary-wing aircraft. Much of the safety briefs could have been briefer if the volunteers had basic aviation safety training.



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## Conclusion

SES Volunteers give up their time to support communities during times of calamity. WA SES provides augmentation for the career staff. There is no competition between staff and volunteers. Staff have a monopoly on information, command and control. The centralisation of command is a fragile thing. Operations involving constantly changing political and social demands, such as with flooded communities, cannot afford to have weak links in the command, control, communications, intelligence, and logistic functions.

SES volunteers come from many walks of life and bring a wealth of knowledge and skills to the service of the community when the community is in its most need. Those knowledge and skills are not a threat to DFES, they can be a service multiplier.

Feedback from the volunteers who participated in deployments to NSW and the Kimberley region provided many examples of what worked well and what did not work so well. Many SES volunteers noted the efforts of stressed and frustrated DFES staff to make the best of the situation. The feedback in this review is largely built on what did not work well from the perspective of the SES volunteer. Many SES volunteers, will dust themselves off and try again next time.

The SES Volunteers Association would welcome a constructive dialogue for improvement that is of mutual benefit to SES volunteers, the DFES, and the community of Western Australia.



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