



Mr A P O'Gorman MLA  
Chair  
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee  
Parliament House  
PERTH WA 6000



Dear Mr O'Gorman

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECOGNITION AND ADEQUACY OF THE RESPONSES BY STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES TO EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA BY WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS ARISING FROM DISASTERS**

I refer to your letter of 12 September 2011 requesting information about the trauma experienced by staff and volunteers of the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) during and after declared natural disasters which have occurred since 2001, and related issues.

**Departmental roles and responsibilities in emergency management**

In 2010-11 DEC had a workforce of 1910 Full Time equivalents (FTE) averaged over the year. DEC employs seasonal workers to assist with suppression of bushfires and implementation of prescribed fires to reduce fuel loads. Seasonal workers are reflected in the variation of 1855 FTE in the September quarter when fire related activity is a minimum to 1941 in the March quarter when fire activity is at a maximum. The DEC workforce is regionalised with 1025 FTEs located in its Regional Services Division and in other divisions located outside the Perth metropolitan area.

DEC's workforce provides services to the community that are grouped into two main streams: Parks and Conservation Services and Environmental Services. Delivery of these services is achieved through a strongly regionalised presence across the State.

The department has responsibility for managing the State's national parks, conservation parks, State forests, timber reserves, nature reserves, regional parks and other lands, amounting to about 26 million hectares of land (an area larger than Victoria) and 1.54 million hectares of marine parks and reserves.

Since July 2003 the department has also had responsibility for fire preparedness and pest animal and weed control on 89 million hectares of unallocated Crown land and unmanaged reserves outside the Perth metropolitan area and townsites (an area larger than NSW).

Emergency incidents involving DEC staff include bushfires, pollution incidents, fatalities on DEC-managed lands, search and rescue, natural phenomena such as floods and cyclones, and wildlife incidents such as whale strandings and crocodile attacks. DEC's role in relation

to these incidents varies from Hazard Management Agency to Combat Agency and Support Agency roles depending on the type of incident. DEC staff may also be exposed to trauma associated with assaults to staff, gruesome discoveries, suicides and media scrutiny.

DEC has a relatively small number of staff who specialise (full time) in emergency management roles such as fire management and pollution response. Many hundreds of DEC staff undertake incident management roles (including front line fire suppression roles), as required, as part of their wider departmental duties. These staff are well trained and many are very experienced in the performance of their emergency response roles.

Critical incidents are defined as those that fall outside the normal staff routines and which involve stressful factors such as a significant threat to an individual or a group. These incidents make intense demands on the emotions and the coping skills of staff and they may be a single event or a protracted period of difficulty. The stress evoked by such incidents is defined as Critical Incident Stress (CIS).

### **DEC volunteers**

There are over 12,000 volunteers registered with DEC. In 2010-11 DEC volunteers recorded 436,216 hours of support to projects across the State. Volunteer activities include wildlife caring, campground hosting, guiding, rehabilitation and Herbarium collections. DEC uses volunteers for bushfire suppression work very infrequently and in small numbers. There is a very low likelihood that DEC's volunteers would be drawn into situations during emergency incidents that would lead them to the effects of CIS. Large scale wildlife rescues such as whale strandings have some potential to cause distress to participating volunteers. No cases of CIS during such incidents have been recorded. For the purposes of this submission, there will be no data presented in regard to volunteers suffering trauma during or following a critical incident.

### **Terms of reference**

The terms of reference outlined in your letter used the term "declared natural disasters which have occurred since 2001". The *Emergency Management Act 2005* uses the term "declared State of Emergency" to prescribe the conditions relating to certain high level emergencies. There have been very few emergency incidents managed by or attended by DEC staff in the period from 2001 to the present that have been a "declared State of Emergency". For that reason it has been decided to include in this submission information relating to trauma and trauma-related health impacts suffered by DEC staff during and following responses to all emergencies and critical incidents attended by DEC staff. This wider view of the issue should assist the Committee's inquiry.

### **Pre-planning and training activities**

DEC has implemented four pre-incident strategies aimed at minimising the effects of CIS and accelerating the recovery of any affected staff. These strategies are:

- being organisationally committed to CIS principles;
- educating staff in CIS;
- training managers in Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM); and
- defining arrangements for activation and assessment.

Organisational commitment to the welfare of employees, contractors, volunteers and third parties who have been affected by CIS is enunciated in the department's Policy Statement *Management of Personnel Affected by Critical Incident Stress* (Appendix 1).

Education programs continue to be implemented to provide staff with an understanding of CIS and to alert them to the debriefing and intervention programs that may be needed.

Selected managers are familiar with CIS management principles to ensure that they can recognise CIS symptoms and are able to manage stress-related behaviours successfully.

Arrangements for the activation and assessment of a critical incident are in place together with arrangements for debriefing and follow-up intervention by trained in-house debriefers or qualified external providers as required. It is DEC's intention to undertake training of in-house debriefers.

### **Other preventative strategies**

Other preventative strategies that can minimise the development of CIS before an incident occurs are outlined in the CIS guidelines (p13 – 14). These include:

- the factors that make for a good work environment and satisfaction in the job help prevent stress. Work satisfaction, good relationships among colleagues, meaningful work, good communication between managers and staff, high morale, good social support and valuing of workers' efforts all create an environment in which stress can be well managed;
- the role of proper training and regular supervision create the opportunity for responsibilities to be shared and for workers to feel that they are supported by the organisation in their activities;
- education in CIS before the event ensures that workers are in a position to recognise early signs and take appropriate action. Major factors in the production of stress are the uncertainty and anxiety that accompany symptoms which are not well understood. Handouts describing the basic facts and strategies are an important part of this; and
- good management practices including clear lines of accountability and responsibility, backup by senior managers and the opportunity to give and receive feedback. These assist staff to see their actions and experiences within a context that limits their personal responsibility and liability, and enables them to feel they are part of a larger system that will support their efforts.

### **Guidance documents**

DEC has, in recent years, developed a comprehensive suite of guidance documents, support services and training opportunities to deal with CISM. This development process has been assisted by some previous work developed by other jurisdictions in Australia (primarily the Victorian Departments of Human Services, and Sustainability and Environment) and the USA.

The following DEC documents are appended to this submission for your reference:

- Policy statement *Management of Personnel Affected by Critical Incident Stress* (Appendix 1);
- Critical Incident Stress Management Guidelines (Appendix 2);
- Brochure *Working in an emergency – Your job, you and your family* (Appendix 3);
- Brochure *Stress: following a critical incident* (Appendix 4);
- Brochure *Back on Track* (Appendix 5);
- Corporate Guideline *Reporting of and responding to emergencies and critical incidents on DEC-managed lands and waters* (Appendix 6);
- Peer Support guidelines (Appendix 7);
- Employee Assistance Program (Appendix 8);
- DEC's Critical Incident Stress Management Model flowchart (Appendix 9); and
- Fire management 2010-11 pre fire season training Briefing Note (Appendix 10).

Many of these documents were developed following the Boorabbin bushfire incident that occurred in the Goldfields Region in December 2007 in which there were three fatalities. Several DEC staff suffered from the effects of CIS following that incident.

Each year DEC conducts comprehensive training for front line combat staff and Incident Management Team (IMT) members prior to the commencement of the fire season. Instruction to staff on CIS is included in the pre-season training (refer to Appendix 10) and during other formal fire training courses. Training for specialist staff and peer supporters is also conducted on a regular basis.

### **Annual budget on pre-event activities**

The department's annual expenditure on pre-event activities is estimated to be \$30,000. A precise figure is difficult to obtain because most of the training for managers and staff is integrated into other associated emergency response and IMT training.

### **Known occurrence of CIS and associated trauma in DEC**

The Boorabbin bushfire was a pivotal incident that had a profound effect on the department and many of its people, however, of recent times there have been at least three other major incidents where CIS and trauma have been palpable outcomes:

- the death of a DEC employee and a contracted pilot in a mid-air collision of light aircraft over the Kennedy Range National Park in February 2008;
- injury to a DEC employee, who was subsequently rendered a paraplegic, when struck by a falling tree during a control burn near Dwellingup in April 2008; and
- a bushfire entrapment incident near Harvey involving 18 departmental personnel on 14 December 2010.

Due to the confidential nature of DEC's Employee Assistance Program (EAP), it is difficult to provide specific information on the quantum of support services provided to staff involved in these incidents, however, the department believes that the EAP has proven invaluable for staff during these types of crises.

### **Adequacy of agency responses**

In keeping with DEC's corporate strategy to "support employees with sound training, safety and support programs" the department has acted promptly to access new information obtained about CISM and to act on the recommendations of relevant inquiries.

Departmental staff who have travelled to other Australian states and to the USA to assist with major bushfire incidents (in which firefighter and public fatalities have occurred) have brought back to Western Australia some of the US and interstate agency responses to the lessons learned about CISM during those incidents. There has also been valuable collaboration between jurisdictions within Australia to develop CIS response procedures that have wide application to all emergency response agencies.

Following the Boorabbin bushfire incident, an independent review of DEC's operational performance was commissioned. The report by GHD Pty Ltd contained one "learning point" and two recommendations in regard to CISM (see Appendix 11). DEC also carried out a comprehensive Post Incident Analysis (PIA) of the Boorabbin (Goldfields Fire 13) incident. A summary of the CISM issue and four relevant recommendations were contained in the PIA (see Appendix 12). All of the recommendations of these reviews have been implemented.

### **Barriers to staff accessing available assistance services**

It is DEC's view that there are no known barriers to staff accessing available assistance services such as the EAP or the Peer Support Program, however it is recognised that critical incidents are characterised by demands for which staff may not be prepared and which are well outside their normal routine. This in itself poses difficulties for staff in understanding their reactions and emotional feelings and often requires the initiation of the CIS response from someone external to the affected work unit or group. A concerted effort has been made by DEC, through training and awareness initiatives, to educate staff, managers, colleagues and families in the recognition of the symptoms of CIS presented by themselves and by others.

### **Activities during an incident and post-event activities**

DEC's guidelines for managing CIS (refer to Appendix 2) prescribe several important steps to be taken during an incident in which a critical event has occurred:

- limiting the incident's duration where possible by reducing uncertainty, loss of control or disorganisation of management or decision-making structures;
- managing a staff member's departure from the scene, or departure from work at the end of the day or shift, by following the principles of demobilisation and defusing;
- re-establishing staff members' personal functions to the greatest extent possible in regard to work roles and responsibilities, family contact and reassurance, self management and decision making;
- resuming as much normality as possible as soon as appropriate to provide structure and familiarity; however, adapt expectations to the needs of the moment;
- providing information to ensure staff understand the event, why it occurred, what its effects are, and what will be required of them in the future;
- reconstituting social and emotional support networks of affected staff, if required;
- confirming that it is OK for staff to be affected by the incident, to have symptoms and to use available supports and resources;
- providing information on CIS and the management responses that will be undertaken;
- sensitising support systems within the organisation to the needs of affected staff; and
- convening a recovery system that will continue to monitor staff needs.

These steps are implemented during and following an incident as required. The detailed procedures to be implemented following an incident are outlined in the guidelines document (p 15 – 27) under five headings:

- immediate personal support;
- demobilisation;
- defusing
- CIS debriefing; and
- follow-up

The brochures *Back on Track* and *Working in an Emergency* also provide valuable information and action steps for managers, staff and their families during and following a critical incident.

The experience gained by DEC's managers and staff in CISM strongly suggests that the support of colleagues during and following an incident is vital to rapid recovery from the effects of CIS. This support can be provided through simple, brief contacts using email, SMS or telephone to express understanding and to offer assistance. Staff have also expressed their preference for a 'familiar face' to conduct or to assist the formal debriefing process.

Counselling and other professional assistance is offered to DEC staff through its Employee Assistance Program. DEC is unable to quantify the number of staff who have accessed these services to seek assistance in treating the effects of CIS because the access to this support service is kept confidential. It is known that several staff suffering from the effects of CIS have sought and obtained assistance from the service provider.

### **Annual budget on post-event activities**

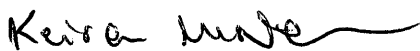
The annual expenditure by DEC on post-event activities is highly variable depending on the occurrence and severity of critical incidents and the associated follow-up events such as formal inquiries, Coronial inquests and other Court procedures. In the three years following the Boorabbin bushfire incident it is estimated that \$30,000 was spent on post-incident support activities (excluding salaries and wages). Some of this expenditure was spent on the development of the suite of documents contained in the appendices and in the initial CIS training for managers and staff.

### **Summary**

It is DEC's view that that the department is currently well placed to respond to the occurrence of Critical Incident Stress in the workplace. The required tools and processes have been developed and implemented to minimise and to mitigate the impacts of CIS on individual staff and on the organisation. Concern for the safety, health and welfare of employees, contractors, volunteers and third parties remains the department's highest priority.

For further information about the content of this submission or about the subject of Critical Incident Stress Management in DEC please contact the Manager, Risk Management, Mr John Ireland on 9219 9779 or email at [John.Ireland@dec.wa.gov.au](mailto:John.Ireland@dec.wa.gov.au).

Yours sincerely



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Atts