



**ASU Submissions
To the Productivity Commission Inquiry**

Natural Disaster Funding

2014

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About the Australian Services Union

The Australian Municipal, Administrative, Clerical and Services Union (ASU) is one of Australia's largest unions, representing approximately 120,000 members. The ASU was created in 1993. It brought together three large unions – the Federated Clerks Union, the Municipal Officers Association and the Municipal Employees Union, as well as a number of smaller organisations representing social welfare, information technology.

Today, the ASU's members work in a wide variety of industries and occupations and especially in the following industries and occupations:

- Local Government (both blue and white collar employment)
- Social and community services, including employment services
- Transport, including passenger air and rail transport, road, rail and airfreight transport
- Clerical and administrative employees in commerce and industry generally
- Call centres
- Electricity generation, transmission and distribution
- Water industry
- Higher education (Queensland and South Australia).

The ASU is the largest Local Government union in Australia. The ASU has members in every State and Territory of Australia, as well as in most regional centres. We are a community-based organisation and take a strong view about the success of Local Government. Our members tend to live in the communities where they work:

In both urban and regional areas, the local council is often the largest single employer; therefore, uncertainty has significant economic impacts locally. The economic interests of Australian urban, rural and remote communities need a resolution.¹

Therefore, ASU advocacy extends beyond negotiated industrial outcomes for members. The ASU has a true commitment to the Local Government industry with a proud history; since 1871, of representing employees and that has a far-reaching effect on the sustainability of all communities. The ASU is a significant advocate and our issues are representative of all Australians.

¹ Parliament of Australia, www.aph.gov.au 2013. Final report on the majority finding of the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government; the case for financial recognition, the likelihood of success and lessons from the history of constitutional referenda. [ONLINE] Available at: http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=jsclg/localgovt/finalreport.htm

Crucial skills and local connections

The Australian Services Union welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Natural Disaster Funding.

The Union is aware of the contribution which many of our members make in serving Australian communities in times of crisis. This includes workers employed in utilities, social and community services as well as local government whose skills and training are crucial in responding quickly and effectively in times of natural disaster.

Many ASU members were volunteer bush fire fighters during the horrendous fires in Victoria in the summer of 2008-2009. In addition, the ASU's local government, social and community services and utilities members were involved in the relief effort. Councils in the fire zones set up relief centres and adjoining councils assisted with their efforts.

As active members of their communities, many ASU members are CFA and SES volunteers, as well as volunteers in many other support organisations

During the 2011 devastating floods which ravaged Queensland and northern NSW, ASU members working in the energy and water industries formed a critical part of the huge effort to assist communities facing the extreme hardship. Utility workers were involved with operating water and energy infrastructure to mitigate damages and ensure the quickest possible return to services after flood waters recede.

Community services workers were staffing relief centres to ensure those who had been evacuated from their homes were cared for. When people return to their homes, these workers provided counselling and other support services to assist people to get their lives in order again.

Workers in local government and utilities are often mobilised early in times of crisis. When a flood is forecast and there is time to prepare, those workers are there transporting sand, shutting down utilities infrastructure, boarding public facilities, assisting the public to make private preparations, etc. They'll be there when the initial crisis is over, dealing with the aftermath, and trying to return services to a state of normality as quickly as possible.

Social and community services workers are likewise mobilised, but their focus is on people and ensuring that evacuation and relief centres are set up and ready to help communities as they confront the damage. In some cases, when energy and town water flows again, when buildings and roads are fixed, the human damage goes on. Community services workers are there for the long term ensuring people struggling have a helping hand.

Local Government

Local government plays a significant role mitigating against national disasters, responding to urgent needs following disasters as well as providing avenues for community education and building community resilience. Their role is often unacknowledged but critical in responding to various catastrophic events.

In addition to supporting emergency services, relief centres and community recovery, council workers share local knowledge with other services to help protect community members, their property and infrastructure. After flooding or cyclone damage there can be an urgent need for roads and drainage engineers, building inspectors and/or surveyors and environmental health officers. As such, councils help safeguard and rebuild networks and local infrastructure.

Councils which maintain sizeable plant and machinery are able to use these at times of emergency following floods or fires. Council labour is a valuable resource for local communities as they are able to respond in a flexible manner to attend to the consequences of natural disasters. For example council bulldozers are often used to assist in fire prone areas, which can be extremely critical in rural areas where communities may otherwise be isolated and there are no other sources of urgently needed plant and equipment.

At times of crisis, have used equipment to help protect private and public property wherever possible.

Councils that own plant and equipment can program their maintenance, road place construction and similar, with the added benefit of availability of plant for emergency services and unexpected requirements. Often Local Government is the lender of resources for bushfires to State emergency services and other community service organisations, it is not uncommon for the army, navy, or civil defence organisations to call upon Local Government for Assistance, not to mention the call from State Government and National Governments during time of emergency

Councils should be encouraged to purchase and maintain their own plant and equipment and additional subsidies should be made available to encourage them to do so. Funding arrangements should provide incentive for councils to retain their own plant, equipment and workforce. However, we note that some funding guidelines discourage councils by, financially penalising councils for using their own employees to repair infrastructure after a disaster such as floods or fires. Under some funding guidelines private contractors can access larger amounts of funding for undertaking the same activity. By assuming that councils should incorporate some forms of disaster infrastructure repair work under their normal funding arrangements only serves to weaken their economic viability and local resources.

One of the great faults with the increased privatisation of road maintenance and other infrastructure provision is that contractors from outside local government areas have an inability to serve and save communities when those communities are being threatened by natural disasters. Once councils have contracted out services, sold equipment and lost experienced employees, communities can be more vulnerable at times of unanticipated natural disasters. People living in regional and rural areas need well resources local councils to provide resources, give backup in times of disaster and

engender confidence in the ongoing viability of communities – this help build the resilience of communities which is greatly needed in times of natural disaster.

Because of the valuable role played by local councils and their workforce, there needs to be certainty about funding and an improvement in funding arrangements to ensure it is adequate to maintain and extend services to the local communities in times of natural disaster.

We would be pleased to have the opportunity to have input into the public hearing process if possible and assist with providing additional information on these issues.