

ABE Public Forum Presentation to Council 25 July 2023 - NoM 23/02 Upgrades to Evacuation Centres

Good Morning,

I am presenting today as the Co-convenor of A Better Eurobodalla (ABE), a community forum working to achieve open, accountable and responsive government in Eurobodalla.

ABE has applied our principles of good governance to today's agenda, with specific reference to NoM 23/02 Upgrades to Evacuation Centres. ABE has taken a close interest in disaster preparedness and recovery in the wake of the catastrophic Black Summer bushfires, which have had major impacts on the Eurobodalla community and environment.

When ABE presented to the previous Council in June 2021 (copy attached to this presentation FYI) regarding disaster preparedness and recovery, it was clear that both our neighbouring LGAs of Shoalhaven & Bega Valley were significantly more advanced than the Eurobodalla Shire in their recovery and emergency preparedness planning. It is therefore timely to review the situation after the passage of another two years, and ascertain whether the situation has changed.

As part of responsibilities designated under the *NSW Emergency Services & Rescue Act 1989*, the General Manager of the relevant Council (or their staff nominee) chair the relevant Local Emergency Management Committee, which is responsible for producing the Local Emergency Management Plan in each area. It is therefore of note that the current edition of Eurobodalla Emergency Plan was created in 2016, with minor changes and updates to ABS statistics in 2019, and has not been reviewed in wake of the Black Summer fires, and nor does it contain a single mention of the word "pandemic". The plan also indicates it is required to be reviewed every 3 years, meaning it is already overdue for renewal. It therefore is an outdated, insubstantial generic document which continues to maintain anomalously low rankings for Eurobodalla bushfire risk and hazard compared to neighbouring LGAs, despite the catastrophic conditions and damage experienced in our region in the Black Summer fires.

In contrast, our northern neighbour's current Shoalhaven Emergency Management Plan was signed off in 2021, and has been updated to take account of lessons learnt in the Black Summer bushfire season, as well as recognising the potential for occurrence of pandemics. To our south, the current Bega Valley Emergency Plan was last updated in April 2021, and includes consideration of the implications of a pandemic.

Furthermore, given that the then Director Infrastructure's Resilience report to Council last September referenced nine natural disaster flood events since the Black Summer bushfires, it would be expected that the current Eurobodalla Shire Emergency Flood Plan would be a priority document for emergency preparedness in the shire. Such expectations are immediately dashed when the current plan is consulted, as it turns out that Volume 1 was prepared in 2013, with volumes 2 and 3 each being prepared in 2006. It is notable that Eurobodalla Emergency Flood Plan states that "*the plan is to be reviewed no less frequently than every 5 years*", so the plan has clearly failed its own benchmark. In the climate change-driven world we all now find ourselves, this an unacceptable situation and reflects poor governance of emergency preparedness.

Once again, our LGA neighbours Shoalhaven and Bega Valley have found it within their capacities to produce current flood management plans, a task which seems beyond governance capabilities in the Eurobodalla. The current volumes of the Bega Valley Flood Management Plan were signed off in March 2021, while the Shoalhaven plan is even more recent, with both its volumes having been authorised in October 2022.

So it doesn't seem to matter whether it is fire, flood or pandemic, the Eurobodalla's current emergency management documentation lags our neighbouring LGAs, and is significantly out of date in many respects. This apparent inability to regularly update current emergency management planning tools in the Eurobodalla is a critical governance issue which needs to be promptly addressed in order to both discharge legislative responsibilities and contribute to community confidence, well-being and resilience.

As outlined in ABE's June 2021 presentation to ESC, community involvement in disaster recovery and preparedness is a key objective of the overarching NSW Recovery Plan meant to guide efforts in the Eurobodalla and across the state. The following extract from the NSW Recovery Plan clearly embodies this aspect :

"Supporting self-help and strengthening the resources, capacity and resiliency already present within individuals and communities are the keys to successful recovery. Empowering communities to create their own solutions can improve overall social cohesion, and this is critical to sustainable recovery outcomes."(NSW Recovery Plan, page 14).

Despite this clearly articulated objective, little of substance has been achieved in disaster recovery planning in the Eurobodalla over the last 2 years. ESC has only prepared one Bushfire Action Recovery Plan in April 2020, which failed to explain how it was actually planning to achieve its stated objective to "*Build community resilience and capability*". The Eurobodalla Bushfire Recovery Plan has never been updated, despite page 6 proclaiming "*This is a working document and is updated regularly*".

In contrast to Eurobodalla's internally focussed approach, Shoalhaven and Bega Valley Shires have continued to pursue their community focussed disaster recovery and preparedness processes outlined in ABE's June 2021 presentation to Council. The intervening two years has seen significant progress in delivery of comprehensive and resilient disaster preparation, management and information tools, particularly in the Shoalhaven, where Shoalhaven Council's decision to invest \$2 million of BLER funding into their Recovery into Resilience (RiR) project is delivering significant dividends.

The RiR project benefits the community by helping residents and visitors get better prepared for emergencies, be more resilient and have better access to accurate, timely and authoritative information in times of crisis. A key practical component is the provision of Local Information Hubs where communications and energy technology have been installed at 19 Council-owned halls and community centres across the Shoalhaven. The Hubs are linked to the Shoalhaven Emergency Operations Centre via satellite internet connection and powered via backup power from solar panels and batteries. This ensures the Hubs are not reliant on mobile phone towers or the power grid, which were major points of vulnerability in both Shoalhaven and Eurobodalla during the Black Summer Fires. The project made use of commercially available technology fitted and installed by local providers, thereby enhancing local business opportunities.

The Shoalhaven Council website also provides extensive and current emergency information, with comprehensive details of what needs to be done under various scenarios. It also includes a "Disaster Dashboard" which is updated in near real time to display the current status of potential emergency situations across the entire Shoalhaven. In contrast, emergency management pages on the ESC website are a very modest affair, essentially consisting of a series of links to external home pages of agencies such as the RFS and the SES, with no substantive indication of any Council involvement in emergency issues. It would be a trivial matter for ESC to at least provide direct links to Eurobodalla-relevant web pages on these external sites (such as the Community Protection Plans for Broulee and Guerilla Bay on the RFS website), making it so much easier for the community to access this information rather than having to trawl through the entire RFS website.

There are multiple opportunities currently available for Council to rectify the issues identified in this presentation, with interested and skilled local stakeholders having already done much of the groundwork necessary to facilitate realistic and achievable projects to boost community emergency preparation and resilience across the Eurobodalla. There is also a ready source of Federal funding available to undertake these projects as well as other relevant initiatives via means of the Commonwealth Disaster Ready Fund, which is proving up to \$200 million per year for 5 years for funding relevant projects commencing in 2023. Round 2 funding applications will open in early next year, and ESC needs to ensure it takes advantage of this program.

Councillor Mayne's NoM today is a modest but welcome step in the right direction for Eurobodalla Council to address significant long running deficiencies in emergency preparedness and building community resilience, but much more remains to be done if we are to bring our shire's level of emergency preparation and community resilience up to a standard commensurate with the escalating hazards and risks posed to our community in the 21st century. Our neighbouring Councils have provided valuable templates of what can be achieved in this regard, and the Eurobodalla community looks to our Council to fulfil its legislated governance responsibilities and moral obligations to help us achieve these objectives.

Dr Brett Stevenson

Co-Convenor, A Better Eurobodalla