

Submission to the Climate Health WA Inquiry

State Emergency Management Committee

August 2019

Dear Adj. Professor Weeramanthri

Thank you for the invitation to provide a written submission to the Climate Health WA Inquiry. On behalf of the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) I am delighted at the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry.

Introduction

May we start by commending the Department of Health (DOH) for undertaking the Inquiry. We understand that it is the first of its kind in Australia and applaud DOH for their foresight. We trust the Inquiry will provide inspiration and guidance for other agencies and sectors around the State and around the country as we collectively tackle the growing challenges of climate change.

We acknowledge the aim of the Inquiry is to review the current planning and response capacity of the health system in relation to the health impacts of climate change and to make recommendations for improvement with respect to mitigation and adaptation strategies. We also recognise the five key objectives of the Inquiry as outlined in the *Terms of Reference*. Our response centres on the three terms of reference that correlate to functions of the SEMC.

The objective around the strengthening of the preparedness and resilience of communities against extreme weather events, with a focus on the more vulnerable in the community is of particular relevance to SEMC. The SEMC has identified six key themes as State Core Objectives that are fundamental to the wellbeing of the State of Western Australia. Each of these themes may in turn be impacted by an emergency event and hence also represent potential *vulnerabilities*. They are People, Economy, Social setting, Governance, Infrastructure *and* Environment.

In addition, work is currently available or underway within SEMC that may add value to the Inquiry by allowing access to existing frameworks that could be applied to measure changes from climate change, gain greater access to local communities through existing mechanisms and shape resilience building in WA through strategy development.

Response by Terms of Reference

Establish current knowledge on the implications of climate change for health in Western Australia (WA) and recommend a framework for evaluating future Implications¹

The SEMC unequivocally acknowledges the global and local challenges, now and in to the future, associated with climate change. One of the SEMC's primary engagement products is the annual

¹ Sections science from Jones, D., 2019, *State of the Climate*, Bureau of Meteorology and IPCC, 2018, *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C*

Preparedness Report. This is produced to inform the Minister for Emergency Services, Parliament and the community on the status of State preparedness and is tabled in Parliament in November each year. For a number of years the Preparedness Reports have emphasised the State's changing climate and the need to understand the risks and required future capabilities to tackle those risks.

Through the *State Emergency Management Framework*, state-wide risk profiling work, preparedness reporting, subcommittee activities and through continuous interactions with scientific agencies (such as the CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology) SEMC are cognisant of the mechanics of climate change. This includes an understanding of the effects of greenhouse gas emissions.

The SEMC acknowledges that the world's average temperature has risen by 1 degree since industrialisation and that in Australia the figure is presently closer to 1.4 degrees and rising. Heat records continue to be broken around the world and in Australia each year.

The *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* has set an ambitious target to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees, however as global emissions continue to rise, SEMC appreciates that average temperatures well above this level need to be planned for, especially in Australia where we are already approaching this warming level. SEMC understands that small increases in global average temperature can make a significant difference to the frequency and size of extreme weather events and thus recognises that the emergency management sector must adapt and be prepared. SEMC's recognition of the urgency of the issue and the associated impacts may be of use to the Inquiry in garnering acceptance, support and traction for its findings.

Since 2013, the SEMC has been undertaking a comprehensive, consistent and all hazards² risk profiling project known as the State Risk Project. The project is conducted at three levels –State, district and local. District risk profiles for the entire State (focussing on the priority hazards for each emergency management district) and State level risk reports for 7 sudden onset natural hazards are available through the SEMC website.

The risk profiling process is based on analysing the potential impacts from credible worst-case scenarios. To date 118 scenarios have been developed/utilised across the State, district and local scales. These scenarios do not yet take into account climate change and may provide a baseline to identify, explore and quantify the impacts of climate changes across hazards within WA. By way of example using these scenarios identified the cascading consequences of changing climate (e.g. extreme heat) may include electricity supply disruption and road, rail and telecommunications disruptions; this will have an effect the ability of DOH, WA Country Health Services and other agencies to provide health and related services to our communities.

These credible worst-case scenarios may contribute to a framework that allows agencies to evaluate the future implications of climate change. As such, the Inquiry may consider highlighting the availability of these products for ongoing adaptation planning for agencies who wish to test their risks and stress-test their service delivery models going forward.

² 'All hazards' refers to the 27 hazards prescribed in the Emergency Management Act and Regulations.

Identify and recommend a program of work to manage the implications of climate change for health in WA, which will strengthen the preparedness and resilience of communities and health services against extreme weather events, with a focus on the most vulnerable in the community

A function of the SEMC is to provide direction, advice and support in order to plan and prepare for an efficient emergency management capability for the state³. It will be critical that the direction and advice provided by SEMC takes into account the findings of this inquiry.

The Emergency Management framework in WA requires emergency management committees meet at the local, district and State levels to establish effective emergency management arrangements. These arrangements have the benefit of being developed by representation from local communities and local government and plan for the highest risk hazards in the locality. SEMC acknowledges that the current policies and processes for the creation and updating of local arrangements could be improved and refined to further strengthen the preparedness and resilience of communities.

SEMC acknowledges there are vulnerable individuals in our community, and those defined as vulnerable may change in nature depending on the hazard being experienced, the state of mind of the individual(s) and existing health issues. It is at the local and district levels that vulnerable people can be most effectively identified at a point in time.

SEMC is commencing the process of developing a community centred disaster resilience strategy and implementation framework specific to WA to strengthen the resilience of communities across all hazards. The disaster resilience strategy and supporting framework will provide a foundation upon which State and local government, non-government organisations, businesses and communities can work together to make WA a more resilient State and may support the development of strategies to manage the impacts of climate change for health in Western Australia.

The disaster resilience strategy will be achieved by determining how government, businesses, communities and individuals can contribute to building resilience as well as providing a shared understanding of disaster resilience that can be adopted and applied across the EM sector and communicated to the public. Key resilience priorities will underpin the disaster resilience strategy and align to the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (2011) and the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (2019).

Evaluate the likely benefits (health and wellbeing, social and economic) arising from climate change mitigation strategies, with a focus on WA health services.

Building on the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the National Disaster Risk Framework, recently approved by Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management, formalises an approach to reducing existing and emerging disaster risk. SEMC supports increasing the focus and funding on implementing mitigation strategies – including climate change minimisation and adaptation strategies – to reduce the likelihood of hazards occurring and reducing their impact should they occur.

³ Emergency Manager Act 2005 Section 14b

SEMC acknowledges the intrinsic difficulty in measuring the benefits, specifically social and economic, resulting from mitigation activities. Often these benefits are intangible, but of significance to the community and all levels of government.

Conclusion

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Climate Health WA Inquiry. We envision ongoing conversations with the Inquiry and look forward to the report, findings and recommendations early next year.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely



Dr Ron F Edwards

Chairman

State Emergency Management Committee