

The Final Report of the Operation Recovery Task Force



Severe Tropical Cyclone *Larry*

This Report has been written in a way which, it is hoped, will be helpful to people with responsibility for organising recovery from some other natural disaster. It is an unpleasant fact in Australia that such events will occur from time to time.

The first part of the document provides an overview of how the recovery was organised and what was done. The intention is that people under pressure can digest it quite quickly.

The attachments contain detailed reports from individual agencies of government who assisted in Operation Recovery. They contain their own analysis and views of the recovery process in each specialised area, and as such could provide ready information to counterpart organisations facing a similar situation.

The attachments also contain examples of key working documents, with a view to saving others from perhaps having to reinvent the wheel.

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Head
Operation Recovery Task Force

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Introduction

Background

On the morning of Monday, 20 March 2006 one of the most devastating natural events to strike Queensland in living memory, severe tropical cyclone *Larry* crossed the coastline of Far North Queensland. This event caused widespread damage to an area estimated at over 17,000 square kilometres, an area about one quarter the size of Tasmania. The Bureau of Meteorology had accurately predicted its path and gathering power over the several days of its build-up. This enabled a great deal of preparation and public notification to take place and this factor was crucial in minimising what was nonetheless colossal damage and, of course, in the extraordinarily low toll of injury, and no deaths, attributable to the cyclone.

In its broad path as it came ashore, the cyclone threatened a population of well over 30,000 in a strip from Babinda, south of Cairns through the town of Innisfail and satellite settlements and rural properties, to Tully in the south, and striking far inland through the Atherton Tablelands. The cyclone was initially adjudged a Category 5 system with estimated wind speeds of up to 290 kilometres per hour. While more powerful than its most damaging predecessor, Tracey, which hit Darwin on Christmas day 1974, it moved more quickly along its path and this was a small mercy.

If *Larry* had come ashore about 80km further north, through Cairns and/or had this occurred a few hours earlier or later (i.e. on top of a high tide), then the injury toll and the damage to infrastructure and industry may have been dramatically higher. As it was, the damage and destruction was devastating enough. While initial media reports obviously focussed on the impact on people's lives and thus their homes and personal possessions, industry, especially primary industry, had been devastated. Subsequent estimates give the economic damage (foregone income) as upwards of half a billion dollars.

The cyclone-struck region was immediately plunged into a state of emergency and one of the most intensive relief operations in Queensland's history swung into action. Men and women from all over the State and from many other parts of Australia rallied to help the people affected in a relief and then a recovery effort which has continued for many months.

The initial relief efforts, consistent with the preparations for the cyclone's arrival ashore, were wholly admirable. Well trained and hugely energetic police and emergency services workers, including fire, ambulance and State Emergency Service (SES) very quickly commenced the work of relieving the physical and psychological consequences of the event. The professional workforce was supplemented by a tremendous volunteer commitment. Queensland and Australian Government public servants, experts in service needs and delivery, assessed and provided for both individual and community-wide problems arising from *Larry*. Volunteers, both individuals from Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and community groups of all sorts, turned out and turned up in their many hundreds, ministering to the needs of their fellow Australians in distress. At every hand, it was uplifting to see so many people doing needful things with such cheerful selflessness.

This was the relief operation which lasted several weeks and as might be expected overlapped significantly with the recovery operation, the further subject of this Report. Many of the attached departmental and agency reports cover significant components of the relief operation in addition to later recovery programs and activities.



Within the land area impacted by the cyclone there were nine Shire/Council areas where damaging effects occurred (Johnstone, Cardwell, Eacham, Atherton, Herberton, Mareeba, Cairns, Etheridge and Croydon) with Johnstone Shire being hardest hit.

Even one year on it is difficult to give a firm and final figure on the number of structures damaged by wind and water – it numbers many thousands from substantial homes and commercial buildings, to many relatively flimsy structures which almost exploded with the force of the wind.

We know that of insured buildings there were almost 19,000 building claims lodged with insurers. This includes homes, commercial buildings, outdoor sheds and the like. When we include claims, for contents destroyed and damaged, over 27,000 domestic insurance claims have been recorded to date, with an estimated total exceeding \$369 million.

In addition, there were many public-owned properties damaged during the event. For example, the Department of Housing sustained damage to 1,146 of their properties and the Department of Education, Training and the Arts sustained damage to 91 schools. The Department of Public Works, through its maintenance and construction arm QBuild, coordinated the repairs to public-owned properties. A comprehensive overview of their activities is contained as Attachment 14.

While this damage to property provides the starkest demonstration of the impact of the disaster and the scale of the recovery task, the impact was also strongly felt upon the economy of the region and the lives of its people. This overview report summarises the main recovery efforts that were made across all of these areas.

The early days – first phase of the recovery

Appointment of the Operation Recovery Task Force

While the quantum of damage was not readily measurable in those first few days post-cyclone, it was obvious that there would need to be a major, focussed, comprehensive and multilateral recovery project to assist the affected community back on to its feet. In this respect, it was not surprising that the Premier appointed a Task Force to provide oversight and help deliver the recovery program to the Far North.

This Task Force was effectively constituted within the first 12 hours of the cyclone, when the Premier appointed General Peter Cosgrove AC, MC (Retd) to head a Recovery Task Force as Chairman. The other members of the Task Force were also quickly appointed, these members being:

- Mr Ross Rolfe - Director-General of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and then Coordinator-General,
- Mr Sandy Hollway AO - who had led the Canberra bushfire recovery effort and former Chief Executive Officer of the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, and
- The Honourable Terry Mackenroth - former Queensland Government Deputy Premier and Treasurer and Chair of the Tropical Cyclone *Larry* Relief Appeal Fund Distribution Committee.

A short time later, Mr John Mulcahy, Deputy Chair of the insurance pinnacle body, the Insurance Council of Australia (ICA), was appointed to the Task Force as the insurance industry representative.

The Premier and the Minister for Emergency Services attended meetings from time to time as necessary. Directors-General of the relevant Queensland Government agencies attended all meetings.

This Task Force structure provided in short order a very senior and tight knit leadership group to drive the recovery, through the efforts of the public service and other specialists. There was public service coordination both in the region through the Operation Recovery Management Group (ORMG) and in Brisbane through the State Disaster Management Group (SDMG), chaired by the Director-General of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. Importantly, the Australian Government participated in both groups. The Task Force notes with deep appreciation the large number of Departments and agencies of the Queensland and Australian Governments who contributed so much to the recovery and whose activities are documented in the attachments to this report.

Simply, the vast bulk of recovery work was done by ordinary Queenslanders, with the great assistance of State and Commonwealth officials and volunteers. The Task Force was a useful and active proponent of alternatives and lines of progression, but as might be assumed, the work as always was done by men and women in the great professional arm of executive government. However, due to the extent of devastation it quickly became apparent that a special team would be required to coordinate and manage a recovery operation of such size and complexity to work on a daily basis in the disaster area and to report back on the evolving situation and to recommend a full range of recovery measures. It was also important to provide a publicly visible focal point for recovery as a means of creating community confidence. Hence, the creation of the Operation Recovery Task Force

(ORTF), with a forward element based on the ground in the affected region and other members on call frequently to assist in planning and monitoring recovery programs.

The Task Force met 19 times, most frequently in Brisbane to facilitate contact with Queensland Government agencies, but also a number of times in the cyclone-affected region. The Chairman of the Task Force was fundamentally resident in the region for over four months and was supported by a small staff who focussed on following up decisions, maintaining linkages with the community and stakeholders, providing “eyes and ears”, and media and public communications.

Attachment 31 provides the Guiding Principles, which governed the establishment and operation of the Task Force. Three subordinate strategic level documents, prepared at the outset, complemented these principles. They were:

- a Strategic Road Map (Attachment 32) that defined the methodology to achieve the Task Force goals;
- a Governance Framework (Attachment 33) that outlined the interaction between the organisations involved; and
- a list of significant events which would contribute to the achievement of Strategic Milestones (Attachment 34) on the way to recovery.

These documents were not set in stone, but deliberately reviewed from time to time and where necessary adjusted. For example, the life of the Task Force itself was extended beyond the period initially envisaged, so that it would continue in place through the testing times of the next (2006/2007) wet season.

Strategic approach

Over and above the Guiding Principles listed in Attachment 31, there were some important points of strategic approach, which developed as the Task Force started to tackle its work:

- Relief of a welfare nature, already underway, must continue without impediment and must develop logically through further phases as necessary; no other recovery activity should impede that fundamental service.
- Noting the lack of basic human subsistence needs and the collapse of the drivers of the regional economy, the Task Force would need to address as a very high priority, the relief of pressures which might lead to ‘population flight’.
- This made housing and employment support a high priority.
- If economic recovery was to be speedy, then early targeted support measures would be needed for industry sectors affected by the cyclone.
- The Task Force acknowledged that the watershed nature of the cyclone in some cases provided both an opportunity and a motivation for industry sector reform but that this was outside the remit of the Task Force, which was created to help restore social and economic viability to the affected area.
- The Task Force would always work on the basis of comprehensive engagement with stakeholders, consultation, transparency and negotiation. The Task Force would work in partnership in preference to any other relationship with policy and executive agencies.
- The Task Force would embrace an ongoing system of performance review to continually check its relevance and effectiveness in contributing to recovery.
- The Task Force would work on minimal organisational and manpower overheads, in keeping with its coordinating rather than executive role.

Absolutely vital to success was the interested and active support of the Premier of Queensland along with the existence of a collaborative, non-partisan relationship between the Australian and Queensland Governments, with the Prime Minister and the Premier setting the tone.

Planning

For planning purposes, the recovery was divided into its key components – human services, rebuilding, economic, environment and communications. It was acknowledged at the outset that these components were strongly linked and interdependent. In this regard it was a major job of the Task Force to establish and cater for these linkages. The objective was to execute a coherent, efficient and effective Recovery strategy by coordinating consultation with stakeholders and providing agencies.

Milestones and appropriate Key Performance Indicators were put in place, monitored, and updated. A task-related ad hoc organisation (see the Task Force organisation chart at Attachment 33) was established under the Task Force umbrella, firstly, to generate and coordinate broader issues and, secondly, to provide specialized support and advice to affected communities.



An example of the former was in the area of industry recovery. An Operation Recovery Industry Action Group (ORIAG) was established comprising state government department and industry representatives, to consider the cyclone-related issues with industry sectors and to propose recovery measures to the Queensland and Australian Governments. A comprehensive overview of this Group is provided as Attachment 25.

In the latter ‘specialised’ area, the Task Force sponsored the creation of a Building Coordination Centre (BCC), based on the Queensland Building Services Authority (QBSA), a statutory body. This Centre, described in greater detail below and in Attachment 24, was a ‘One-Stop Shop’ for anyone looking for information or advice in relation to building repair.

Another specialized facility available to affected communities was the ORMG, which carried over from the intensive relief operations when it was, with a somewhat different agency membership, known as the State Disaster Coordination Centre (Forward). It supervised and supported a series of shop-fronts for government welfare services around the *Larry* area.

Ongoing recovery activities

Community support, health and well-being

The fundamental challenge created by *Larry* was not the damage to bricks and mortar, nor to the mainsprings of the regional economy, significant though this damage was. Rather it was the damage to people's well-being both physical and mental, people who had seen their homes and livelihoods laid low, their hard work of previous years jeopardised, their futures uncertain but bleak in prospect.

Even the tough and hardy people of the Far North could be excused for a sense of despair. The Task Force and government agencies were aware of the psychological pattern which can follow a major disaster, whereby resignation or depression can set in once the initial crisis has passed and as the months of living in the aftermath of the disasters wear on. An effort was made to monitor this situation, both in terms of the general community mood, and alertness to individuals who might find it particularly hard to recover. In such circumstances, as in all post-disaster activities, sensitive, speedy and effective community support had to be a top priority.

A first order of business was to provide small cash grants to people of means or otherwise, unable to access funds because of the loss of electrical power and the incapacity this caused to financial institutions. This part of the relief operation and the delivery of the more expected and conventional social welfare services are more fully described in Attachments 2 and 23 to this Report (and for convenience Attachment 30 provides a list of all key assistance measures).

Health, housing and hunger were logical early preoccupations in the relief activities. Access to clean water and adequate food were major pillars of the unstinting efforts of the SES and the contingent of Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel, the latter from Townsville and Cairns. Together with an initial clean-up of debris sufficient to allow route and home access and to remove imminent danger, this serving of the basic needs of people characterised their tireless efforts.

In its way, the urgent and immediate campaign embarked upon by Ergon, Energex and Powerlink to restore electrical power to the disaster area, although technical and mechanical in its work, was of the same humanitarian quality as those other more obviously humanitarian activities. It is interesting to note that the Queensland Government only terminated the declaration of disaster on 3 April 2006 coincident with the restoration of gridded or large generator power throughout all but a few pockets of the disaster area – such these days is the way in which the availability of electricity is viewed as a staple of reasonable living. Ergon and Powerlink are widely regarded as having performed magnificently in restoring power as quickly and comprehensively as was done after *Larry*. Attachment 10 provides a comprehensive summary of activities in this utility arena.

Beyond the State and Commonwealth organised disaster relief forces, which swung into action after the cyclone on 20 March 2006, many NGOs, both national and local, poured aid, expertise and groups of energetic and willing workers into the relief effort. So prolific was this response that there seems to the Task Force great benefit in contemplating a state government system of fostering, registering and harmonising the work of these great men and women, as a matter of contingency planning and consultation before the event of any future natural disaster. The practical assistance, the skills, the energy and the boost to morale that these NGOs bring is crucial but there can be great efficiency and effectiveness gains made if they agree to some level of coordination within the disaster area. This matter will be subject of a recommendation later in this Report.



All banana crops were flattened.

Early in the relief operation, the key decision was taken to establish multi-agency shop-front activities through the disaster area, to bring human services to the people who had so much more to do than travel long distances and queue up at a succession of agency office premises. These One Stop Shops, which numbered 13 initially, but were consolidated to two centres later on in the recovery process, were established in a dispersed and targeted way to engage the maximum number of the affected population by providing a unified point of contact and support to people requiring assistance.

In this way many government departments and agencies at this crucial level of interface with a large number of Australians with complex and urgent needs were able to apply powerful, quick and effective assistance with minimal 'red tape'. Significant financial assistance was provided to people in need and a quick and sympathetic assessment could be more readily made of their immediate needs – for example in terms of health, food, clean water, shelter and money.

The One Stop Shops were a very useful two-way conduit of both practical help and information and advice. The Task Force considered them a great means of maintaining a 'health check' on the affected population, its progress in rehabilitation and any emerging issues for attention.

The One Stop Shop concept was, in short, very appropriate as a means of leveraging great agency expertise to provide for powerful and effective multi-faceted support in post disaster circumstances – it was a place where a range of experts and officials with delegated authority could deal on the spot with a range of problems. It will be the subject of a recommendation later in this Report.

In the delivery of human services, two other points were especially noteworthy.

First, whereas the emphasis in the early period was on the delivery of services on a large scale across the community, later in the recovery process the emphasis shifted towards individual case management. This was an effort to provide a holistic solution to the problems facing a particular individual. People with vulnerabilities which existed before the cyclone sometimes found these to be exacerbated and were in need of particular support.

Second, in an area as extensive as the area affected by *Larry*, with a widely dispersed population, it was vital to have outreach of human services beyond Innisfail and other points of population concentration. As the recovery went on, more attention and resources were devoted to this.

Tropical Cyclone *Larry* Relief Appeal and offers of assistance

Under the banner of community support, it is very important to acknowledge the huge wave of support by ordinary Australians, a great number of NGOs and by corporate Australia.

On the day of the cyclone itself, the Queensland Government set up the Tropical Cyclone *Larry* Relief Appeal Fund. As noted earlier, the Honourable Terry Mackenroth agreed to administer the Fund. At the date of this Report, the Fund had attracted over \$22 million and allocated over \$18 million for a wide variety of individual and community needs, from housing to sports clubs and other projects to restore and uplift community life more generally in the cyclone area.

Although, in broad terms, the success of Operation Recovery has obviated the further need for a dedicated and ad hoc Task Force to assist recovery progress and momentum, the Fund will continue in operation until all of its objectives have been reasonably met. Mr Mackenroth will, over time, continue to furnish progress reports and necessary recommendations to the State Government. Mr Mackenroth has established a comprehensive consultation and assessment process incorporating respected community leaders to ensure that compassion and wisdom match the necessary rigour and objectivity in decisions concerning disbursement.

The generosity of the community in Queensland and Australia was also shown by numerous offers of in-kind support ranging from building materials and services to clothing and food. This became a problem of stewardship and proper disbursement. Although invariably the offers were well intended, they did not always fit the needs of the moment. Also, offers can be problematic when not combined with an effective means of transport and delivery. Nevertheless, the offers were appreciated in the spirit in which they were made.

The Task Force was concerned to put this in-kind support to the best possible use for the people affected by the cyclone. This necessitated a major audit of all offers, several months into the recovery, and a major effort to consult the various individuals and organisations providing support to maximise the use of the in-kind contributions.

It would be useful for people in charge of recovery efforts following natural disasters to provide information to media outlets about what is and is not needed at a very early stage. This will help to ensure that the assistance, which is provided by the public, really fits with what the impacted community requires; and indeed those efforts by the media itself to generate support, which can be very powerful, hit the mark.

Housing and construction

There were close to 19,000 houses needing repair and a large number of other structures such as sheds, garages and carports. Of these homes, a majority were covered to some degree by insurance and the remainder were either public housing or homes uninsured by the owner. A large number of business premises also required some level of repair. The overall insurance claims bill totals over \$369 million, involving almost 25 insurers. This was the greatest single event set of claims on Australian insurers since the hailstorms in Sydney in 1998.

While many aspects of recovery were complex in conception and execution, it may seem that issues concerning housing and construction would be relatively straightforward. It is true that, in the end, this came down to a question of the necessary logistics being available in the affected area to achieve repair and reconstruction to meet some simple planning guidelines. That said, accomplishing housing repair goals took great energy, expertise, commitment and goodwill by homeowners, insurers, builders, certifiers and inspectors and the many public servants in the public housing arena. The challenge was a complex one, and closely interwoven with the other imperatives of recovery, including human needs and rebuilding of the economy.

The Task Force espoused a goal of having all homes repaired to a weatherproof standard by 1 December 2006. This meant that insurers were encouraged to set themselves to have proper roofs, with no tarpaulins necessary, on the many hundreds of homes under their purview by the full onset of the approaching wet season. The same standard of course applied to those responsible for the stock of public housing in the cyclone area.

Gaining an appropriate number of builders and associated tradesmen and women to really attack the repair and rebuilding task was challenging. It was necessary to avoid a very steep price hike as the only means of getting lots of trade labour to move up for

the necessary months of work. Some expected price rises did occur but the number of tradespeople and the prices remained in fair equilibrium and much credit for this is due to the insurers who had the bulk of the trade workforce in their employ.

The repair efforts were chronically bedevilled by a further four months of wet weather. It is to the great credit of insurers, the building tradespeople and the Queensland Government public servants in the public housing area that the ambitious and difficult goal of repairing homes to weatherproof standard by 1 December 2006 was very largely met. It obviated a large number of people enduring a full new wet season with a tarpaulin as their major weatherproof protection. A small number of dwellings remain under tarpaulins, at last count 24, but these are in the main owned by absentee owners or people who have taken an insurance settlement and whose home repairs are now fundamentally in their own hands.

Of course much insurance-funded work remains to be done beyond the weather-proofing priority. For example, many homes still require internal repair and fitting out and this work will continue during 2007. Attachments 24 and 26, deal with insurance, repair and rebuilding issues in further detail.

Many excellent lessons concerning insurance and repair matters were learnt in the last year. It is however, important to note that the Task Force views the insurance industry response to the disaster as being broadly very positive, in the sense that the dimensions of the emergency were recognised and tackled seriously by insurance companies and industry representatives. This does not mean that experience with insurance companies has been universally satisfactory to homeowners, and nor would this be expected. It proved to be crucial to have special arrangements in place to handle concerns and complaints, and indeed this was welcomed by the industry. Industry representatives have been particularly vigilant to influence their membership to be quick, attentive and compassionate in relation to Cyclone *Larry* issues.

The Building Coordination Centre

Although an essential part of the repair and rebuilding effort mentioned above, the BCC has been and remains such an important service organisation that it requires this specific mention in the Report.

The BCC concept grew out of the appreciation gained in the early aftermath of *Larry* that the issues of rebuilding were crucial, complex and time sensitive. Simply, the numbers of people urgently seeking entry into the complexities of the home repair process would immediately overload the normal resources existing in local jurisdictions. Building trade resources would be at a premium. The potential chokepoints of processing development applications, plan approvals, site inspections and work inspections may have significantly impeded progress as the new wet season inexorably approached. In addition, thousands of insurance claims would be processed simultaneously by dozens of insurers for policy holders very unused to the high financial amounts and complex issues involved.

The BCC was the major response to this situation. Set up in Innisfail in the first month after the cyclone, it brought together experts in the complexities of the building repair process to advise and assist consumers, to the extent possible, from first inquiry to the satisfactory completion of the repair work. Its work will be ongoing well into 2007, acknowledging the continuing case load of repair and rebuilding issues.

Importantly the BCC incorporated an insurance consumer advisory service of State-appointed independent advisors (Attachment 27). This was complemented by an on-ground representative of the (national) Insurance Ombudsman Service (Attachment 28) who worked from the One Stop Shop and in close collaboration with the independent insurance advisors. The combined result was a very great asset to advise consumers from an early stage and to help untangle knotty issues and to assist completion of insurance

funded work. These services remain operative but will be kept under review depending on workload. The BCC has been an important and successful recovery initiative and will be the subject of a recommendation later in this Report.

Attachment 24 provides a full account of the activities of the BCC.

Economic recovery and employment

Without the Queensland and Australian Governments helping to rehabilitate the economy of the disaster struck-region, all of the humanitarian relief and recovery measures would have simply been band-aids.

Banana plants at all stages of maturation were knocked flat and all fruit was lost. Sugar cane was in general terms months from maturation, laid over flat, and very obviously damaged. Many fields of sugar or bananas were strewn with wreckage and tree branches from upwind sources, and this fouling was an additional impediment to recovery in each case. In the event sugar quantity and quality was down in the midyear crop, however all indications are that rehabilitation will be satisfactory for the 2007 crop. Although the size and economic strength of the sugar and banana industries meant that the major economic impact of the cyclone was felt through them, dairy, timber, tree crops, aquaculture and tourism industries were all severely adversely affected by *Larry*.

This of course rippled down into secondary and tertiary industry, compounded often by their own infrastructure damage and financial obligations. Not only was major industry deprived of the seasonally expected cash flow but the demand by primary producers for seasonal labour vanished in the few hours of the cyclone's destructive path inland. In addition, the financial position of many farmers meant their ability to pay reasonable wages to their standing labour force was in serious question.

Employment, a social and community well-being issue, also became a significant economic question in supporting the economic viability of the region.

The Australian Government, under National Disaster Relief Arrangements (NDRA) immediately put in place grants, which were readily available as an initial support measure for businesses and indeed all eligible applicants. Within a few weeks the major 'broad brush' recovery measure for primary producers and businesses was fielded: concessional loans (of up to \$500,000 in extreme cases) on very favourable terms.

This was accompanied by a variety of employment support programs designed, firstly, to enable employers to pay a viable wage to their work force and, secondly, under special employment programs, to afford meaningful cyclone recovery related work to the unemployed, notably those who might have expected seasonal employment if the cyclone had not intervened. These employment programs met a dual need – to provide jobs in the region and to provide a workforce for reconstruction. In addition they provided access to training for a significant number of people and this will be of lasting benefit. A year on, employment in the region has been sustained despite the impact of the cyclone on the economy and is now once again solid.

The economic and employment support programs are described in more detail in Attachments 5 and 15.

While the major relief measures to assist business viability were financial, the Task Force believed it important to commence a dialogue with industry sector groups to gain the input of industry representatives and government experts on the issues confronting these sectors in their recovery. This dialogue focussed on the impact of the cyclone and whether any further measures, financial or otherwise, were sought and warranted.

These industry groups, jointly convened under the auspices of both the Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries and the Department of State Development were a very productive and well received means of tapping into industry expertise concerning

the general state of health of the industries, as well as achieving the primary purpose of exploring and developing ways and means to enhance recovery. This process of discussion led to a large number and wide range of proposals and ideas concerning economic assistance. The role of the Task Force was to sift these suggestions, in order to formulate advice to the Queensland Government. As noted, the Task Force saw its remit as cyclone recovery, rather than longer term, structural industry issues. Once decisions had been taken about what was feasible and affordable, it was important that the relevant government departments provided feedback to industry. The experience of severe tropical cyclone *Larry* may have in fact enhanced the processes of consultation between government and industry in the region on a lasting basis.

With the sort of resilience you would expect of primary producers, the economy is now back on a viable and self-sustaining footing, with some sectors such as retail and rental accommodation enjoying a boost to their business. Construction and repair services also injected activity into the economy. However, full recovery still lies in the future for many businesses and some long-term casualties remain such as producers of tree crops, where their trees have been destroyed and new trees will take a number of years to produce cash crops.

The environment

As well as the damage to buildings, infrastructure and crops, the overwhelming impression after the cyclone was of the way the destructive winds had torn apart the beautiful and lush rainforests framing these developed areas of Far North Queensland. Not only were places of great environmental significance brought low but the detritus blocked roads, fouled fields, flattened fences and destroyed animal habitats (e.g. some of those for the cassowary) caused concern. While in the main, the results of this damage across the large tracts of forest in the Far North must necessarily be left for nature to repair over time, fouled waterways can cause flooding, hazarding crops, homes and other infrastructure and depriving farmers of expected irrigation. Equally crop and pastureland fouled with debris – mostly natural but also man made – is not fully productive.

Two major initiatives fielded during Operation Recovery were aimed at cleaning up this environmental waste. Each had the added benefit of providing both very worthwhile employment and training to local citizens. The first was Operation Farm Clear (OFC) which as the name implies was directed to cleaning up debris from farm acreage for its return to full utility. The second was the Preventative Waterways Debris Removal (PWDR) program, a waterways clean up program that commenced late in 2006, and which at the time of reporting has made excellent progress in clearing a number of high priority waterway sections in the *Larry* area. Both these important environmental programs and other significant environmental issues are described in Attachments 11, 13 and 17.

Public communication and involvement

The immediate presence of the media in the aftermath of a natural disaster is most important to the relief and recovery efforts thereafter. It is through the agency of the media that the public receives the vast bulk of its information and frequently governments also rely heavily on media reporting to ascertain additional information to that being passed through official channels. In this case the media helped to mobilise support in a way not possible a generation ago.

If the media are unaware of the governments 'on-the-ground read' of the situation, what plans are unfolding, and what resources are being marshalled into the relief work, then this is an opportunity lost. Moreover, potentially inaccurate points of view, at cross purposes to what is actually being done, can be brought to the public perception. The bottom line is that the relationship between the people responsible for organising the relief and recovery, on the one hand, and the media on the other, is a very important

relationship to both sides. It is most important that there be efficient arrangements and sufficient resources to make this relationship work effectively.

In the case of severe tropical cyclone *Larry*, much individual good work was done within the early relief effort to support and brief the media. However, the media presence and capacity when natural disasters occur will only grow over time. The appetite for information, but also the value of the media as a channel of communication on relief and recovery matters will therefore also grow. Therefore greater support and briefing resources on the ground from the first moments of relief work appear justified. This will be the subject of a recommendation later in this Report.

Disruption of normal communication channels and sources of information for people is one of the first impacts in most natural disasters. Severe tropical cyclone *Larry* was no exception. The media did an excellent job in the circumstances, including the electronic media in providing real time information. However, as a general observation, the immediate (and it might be said in many disasters, invariable) loss of mains power means that the instant, pervasive reach of mass media falls away sharply – not even the ubiquitous world wide web will work!

In this regard, contingency plans for post-disaster communications have to focus even more clearly on redundant means of transmitting and receiving vital information. This is important from several points of view – the safety of life and limb, directing relief efforts by broadcast, and helping to maintain and restore public confidence in the disaster area and preventing panic.

In the case of *Larry*, not enough people had heeded advice to have battery-operated radios on hand. Televisions, phones and the internet were down because of the lack of power and many people observed to the Task Force that, in among all their wants and needs, this lack of broadcast information was the most disconcerting. There is a recommendation arising from this issue later in this Report.

This sense of disempowerment and thus disenchantment through ignorance can, and often does, become chronic through relief operations and into the recovery phase unless authorities take special steps to reach people no matter what their circumstances. It becomes a key task for those involved in any form of recovery activity to publicise their work and plans in a number of forms, in order to reach their target audience in some way.

As an integral part of the severe tropical cyclone *Larry* recovery effort, public comment was encouraged and often coordinated by the Task Force. One of the Chairman's immediate staff in the region was full-time on media relations and public communications. All methods were used – a custom made weekly newsletter, radio broadcasts, media 'blitzes', regular columns in newspapers, 'town hall' meetings, road shows, mail outs, community networking, and information pamphlets provided to 'drop-in' callers at the One Stop Shops, the BCC, and so on.

Naturally, this activity directed by the Task Force was strongly supplemented by government agencies, industry groups and NGOs using their own communications channels.

Press officers took on the wider role of information or public communication officers.

A procedure adopted by the Task Force to help it to understand how the recovery was proceeding in reality and in the mind of the community, was to conduct several customer and stakeholder surveys. These were done through discussions designed to sample opinion, rather than complicated, onerous, or time consuming opinion polling. One significant focus of this self-checking activity by the Task Force was assessing its effectiveness in getting its messages to the people in need of support and information. Mr Sandy Hollway, with his great experience as a senior public servant, his leadership role in the Sydney Olympics organisation and crucially his experience leading the recovery effort after the Canberra bushfire was a pivotal adviser on our need and ability to communicate widely and constantly. In relation to the derivation and maintenance of this recovery communication plan, a recommendation has been included later in this Report.

Transitional arrangements

It is the nature of special machinery that it cannot and should not need to last forever. It was realised from the outset that one of the criteria of success of the recovery from severe tropical cyclone *Larry* would be the ability of the Government to wind down the Task Force at an appropriate stage and make a transition back towards government business as usual.

The passage from special machinery to business as usual can never, however, be abrupt in these circumstances. There needs to be a careful transition so that the baton of recovery is not dropped. The Task Force gave considerable thought to the timing and nature of transitional arrangements. The essential approach has been to:

- get a good understanding of the recovery work remaining to be done in each of the core areas of human services, rebuilding, economic development, environmental rehabilitation and public communication
- decide on the extent to which this ongoing work will require the retention of some parts of the special machinery (for example, the One Stop Shops or the BCC), perhaps in modified form, and for how long
- decide, by the same token, what ongoing work can be satisfactorily transferred back to the mainstream of government activity, and the timing for this
- specify, against this background, roles and responsibilities for the recovery, and a broad timetable for the remaining work.

The transitional arrangements are covered in more detail in Attachment 35.



On the road to recovery.

Recommendations

This overview Report confines itself to a short number of significant recommendations, rather than a long menu of suggestions for consideration by the Government. There are two reasons for this. First, it can be taken as read that the organisational and strategic model adopted by the Queensland Government for the recovery from severe tropical cyclone *Larry* has very largely been successful. It could be replicated in similar circumstances in Queensland (or, it is suggested, in other jurisdictions) and adjustments would largely be of detail and at the margin. Second, as noted earlier in the Report, much of the credit for recovery operations lies with the agencies of Government and each of them have conducted their own process to learn the lessons and to formulate recommendations for the future.

Recommendation 1

This Report should be considered for publication so that the insights, data, conclusions and recommendations are available within Queensland and other jurisdictions to assist with disaster management issues in the future.

Recommendation 2

A concerted effort should be made to engage NGOs and volunteer groups in contingency planning and preparations for natural disasters.

It is very clear that the NGOs and volunteers step forward quickly and effectively when a disaster is imminent or has occurred. Also, volunteers of course provide vital services across the range of the needs of Australian society every day of the year. This includes, importantly, emergency services and human services.

However, there may well be untapped potential to draw upon the cooperation and expertise of the community sector, not only in relation to the more familiar matter of providing emergency services and immediate relief, but in relation to how the longer term recovery should be accomplished.

In particular, there should be dialogue and decisions about the division of roles and responsibilities, and where different organisations would best put their effort.

Recommendation 3

In any future disaster of comparable proportions, consideration should be given to the co-location of the BCC and the principal One Stop Shop.

In the case of recovery from *Larry*, both the One Stop Shops and the BCC worked very effectively as points of coordination between different service providers and, more importantly, in providing a coherent service to customers. However, the fact that they were not co-located, nor under a common management, meant that these advantages of coordination and coherent service delivery were not fully optimised.

It is important to recognise that both human services and building assistance are specialised fields, each complex in its own right. Therefore, even with a co-located and/or jointly managed operation, there would need to be distinct but related teams for delivery of advice and assistance to customers.

At the same time, frequently an individual or a family in need of assistance would be facing interwoven strands of difficulties – with repair and rebuilding problems linked to other material or psychological pressures. Therefore, a fully holistic service for the customer would best be achieved by having the One Stop Shop and BCC under the same roof.

Recommendation 4

That consideration be given to additional ways and means to improve broadcast capability into disaster-affected regions, particularly for the early aftermath of any disaster when a loss of power characterises the event.

There are two issues here. First, while it is desirable that everybody who lives in a disaster prone area would have transistor radios with fresh batteries, experience shows that often people think of this too late and are left without any means to receive radio broadcasts. It may be that a useful capability for the emergency services would be to be able to deploy radio and loudspeaker kits to key locations.

Second, while radio networks, especially the ABC provided great public service by their emergency information broadcasts, experience shows that this information may need to be broadcast exclusively and repetitively for days or even weeks. In this regard, it would be useful to consider emulating a system used in other countries, namely the availability of specific, “emergency-only” radio broadcast frequencies in disaster prone areas, to be activated and operated where necessary as an adjunct to normal broadcasting. Broadcasts on the normal frequencies would cue people to tune to the “emergency-only” frequency for detailed disaster relief information.

Recommendation 5

In any future large-scale disaster or event, consideration be given to a centrally-located Media Operations Centre.

Such a media centre would become the focal point for raw information for the large number of media representatives, locally, from other parts of the State, and from further afield. As many of these people would not have local knowledge, it would be beneficial to have a central mustering point, where maps and other information guides could be handed out.

A central media centre would be ideal for media advisors and liaison officers from the many government departments, agencies and non-government organisations servicing the disaster region. It should offer an area to stage media conferences, plus sufficient room for media crews to work – and some separation of rival media crews may be needed as well. It should also be a centre where media advisors can be on hand on a rolling roster to answer enquiries and to keep in touch at ground level with media groups.

A media centre should also contain an area designated for information bulletin boards and a distribution point for media releases and fact sheets. The supply of electricity and information technology systems would be a vital part of any functioning media centre.

However, such a central point could also host breaking news conferences to help relay vital information about developments – especially when landlines and mobile phone systems may be cut or overloaded. A designated media centre could also host media conferences and briefing sessions at set times of the day or night – for example 10am and 2pm to allow media groups time to meet deadlines.

While information from such media conferences would not offer all the material needed by media crews on a daily basis, they would be a useful starting point.

Consideration would also need to be given to the number of media advisors needed to assist during any future *Larry*-sized disaster.

Recommendation 6

An early and high priority task in recovery from a natural disaster should be the development of a coordinated, succinct, practical and flexible public communications plan.

It is probably inevitable, and certainly entirely understandable, that in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster, everybody available will focus on delivering services and assistance to the people affected in one way or another, rather than on developing ways and means of communicating with the public over the longer term. In these early days, to the extent that there is an effort at public communication, it will tend to focus on the electronic and written media and to be broad in its targeting. In its early days, there is very important information to be provided. For example, information about what is not needed by the impacted community, so that offers of public support and assistance meet real needs. There will often be some level of confusion as people work frantically to respond to the disaster.

As noted, this is natural. However, it is very important that the development of a more coherent approach to public communications should not be repeatedly postponed and delayed. It needs to be recognised that effective public communications is not some optional add-on to the 'real' work of recovery, but a recovery service in itself. Furthermore, it is not possible that there can be efficient service delivery in relation to rebuilding, human support or any other aspect, without an efficient plan and machinery to get the messages on these matters out to the public. People need to know about the assistance which is being put in place for them, and how to access it. Effective public communication will also provide a channel back from the customer, permitting issues to be identified and services to be improved. Perhaps above all, an effective public communication program will be crucial to achieving community confidence, an intangible but decisive factor in the success of the recovery effort.

The public communications plan need not and should not be a highly polished plan of the kind which might be adopted by an ongoing private company or government organisation. It is more important to get something out quickly, which meets real needs, which is understood by the communications team across a range of government agencies and other organisations, which provides practical guidance to them, and which can be kept under review and adjusted as circumstances change. Typically, the plan must identify its targets, its main messages, the modes of communication which will be used, a non bureaucratic structure for coordination, and means of taking new challenges on board and adjusting the targets, messages or methods. As in every aspect of the recovery, it is the outcome which matters, not the detail of the process or the elegance of the document.

Recommendation 7

The Queensland Government should consider the endorsement of transitional arrangements proposed in this report, in order to ensure as far as possible the smooth completion of the recovery and the ultimate return to government operations as usual in the cyclone-affected area.

This recommendation recognises, of course, that the government should not be slavishly tied to the detail of the transitional proposals. On the contrary, the recovery should be kept under review, so that the detail of the transitional arrangements might well be adjusted in light of experience.

Conclusion

To step back now and look at the experience of the Task Force overall, there are several fundamental observations to be made.

It is impossible to achieve success in a venture of this kind without a unified and single-minded alliance between governments at all levels, the private sector, and community organisations. The task is too large in scale and too complex in nature for any kind of fragmentation or disputation.

This is not to say that there should not be division of responsibilities for leadership of different parts of the recovery effort. On the contrary, a key to success is clear definition of lead roles and responsibilities. The essential job of the Task Force and other coordinating machinery is then to provide a continuous oversight, coordination, and encouragement to the whole structure.

Nor is it to say that there cannot be differences of opinion on analysis, policy, and program design and implementation. As in any other situation in which government and the community are faced with major and complicated challenges, all the viewpoints and options need to be brought forward and thrashed out. But this must be done in a collegial spirit between organisations and people unified in their commitment to getting results.

This in turn relates to another major point about effective management of disaster recovery, namely the vital importance of generating momentum. It will rarely be possible to have all the desirable information and data when important decisions have to be taken. Judgement must be exercised and expeditious decision-making is the order of the day. The big building blocks for recovery need to be constructed fast and early, with the embellishments and even changes and adjustments made later on.

Finally, recovery is impossible unless the organisations and people responsible are operating within a positive and supportive community environment. The community will be the greatest source of ideas, resources, and that intangible but indispensable ingredient, confidence – the kind of confidence that becomes infectious and self-fulfilling.

Accordingly, the Task Force expresses its thanks and admiration to all organisations and individuals who have contributed so much to the successful recovery from severe tropical cyclone *Larry*, but above all to the strength of the community of Far North Queensland.

List of abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AGCDTF	Australian Government Counter Disaster Task Force
AGDRC	Australian Government Disaster Recovery Committee
AIIMS	Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System
BCC	Building Coordination Centre
BOM	Bureau of Meteorology
BSS	Business Support Services
CLCG	Cyclone <i>Larry</i> Control Group
CLEAP	Cyclone <i>Larry</i> Employment Assistance Package
CSAHSC	Child Safety After Hours Service Centre
CSSC	Child Safety Service Centre
CWA	Country Womens Association
DDCs	District Disaster Coordinators
DES	Department of Emergency Services
DDMG	District Disaster Management Group/s
DLGPSR	Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation
DME	Department of Mines and Energy
DMR	Department of Main Roads
DNRW	Department of Natural Resources and Water
DPC	Department of the Premier and Cabinet
DPI&F	Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries
DTFTWID	Department of Tourism, Fair Trading and Wine Industry Development
EMA	Emergency Management Australia
EMQ	Emergency Management Queensland
EMT	Emergency Management Team
FaCSIA	Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
FNQ	Far North Queensland
FNQNRM	Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management
GVP	Gross Value of Production
IAG	Industry Action Group
ICA	Insurance Council of Australia
ICS	Incident Command System
IDMG	Internal Disaster Management Group
IDRO	Insurance Disaster Response Organisation
IOS	Insurance Ombudsman Service
IRO	Industry Recovery Officers
LDMG	Local Disaster Management Group/s
LGAQ	Local Government Association of Queensland
MBA	Master Builders Association
MHDRT	Mental Health Disaster Recovery Team

MSQ	Maritime Safety Queensland
NDRA	Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements
NDRRA	Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements
NEMCC	National Emergency Management Coordination Centre
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
ORIAG	Operation Recovery – Industry Action Group
ORTF	Operation Recovery Task Force
ORMG	Operation Recovery Management Group
PICRAS	Primary Industries Cyclone Recovery Advice Service
PSRT	Public Safety Response Team
QAS	Queensland Ambulance Service
QBSA	Queensland Building Services Authority
QCS	Queensland Corrective Services
QFRS	Queensland Fire and Rescue Service
QGIF	Queensland Government Insurance Fund
QPS	Queensland Police Service
QR	Queensland Rail
QRAA	Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority
QT	Queensland Transport
RFS	Rural Fire Service
RSM	Regional Services Manager
SBFOs	Small Business Field Officers
SDC	State Development Centre
SDMG	State Disaster Management Group
SERT	Special Emergency Response Team
SES	State Emergency Service
SHS	State High School
SIMT	State Incident Management Team
SOCC	State Operations Coordination Centre
SSB	Specialist Support Branch
SPER	State Penalties Enforcement Registry
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
WORC	Western Out-Reach Camps