



# Civil Defence review aims for **Better emergency response**

By **John Pfahlert**, Chief Executive, Water New Zealand.

In early June the Government decided to undertake a review of matters around civil defence with a view to getting better responses to natural disasters and other emergencies.

Because disruption to water reticulation networks is significantly impacted in earthquakes and flooding events Water New Zealand decided to work with the Engineering Leadership Forum to develop a submission to Government.

The review will provide advice to the Minister of Civil Defence on the most appropriate operational and legislative mechanisms to support effective responses to natural disasters and other emergencies in New Zealand. The purpose is to ensure that our emergency response framework is world leading, and well placed to meet future challenges. In light of recent events it is appropriate to see how we can further enhance and strengthen the current system.

## **Surge capability**

In disasters, territorial authorities need support that integrates into existing business processes, operational frameworks and organisation culture without causing disruption and dysfunctionality. The Engineering Leadership Forum recommended the creation of properly trained teams of experts to be deployed by the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management (MCDEM) to assist local authorities and lifeline utilities, and to take over regional controller roles in significant emergencies.

This is what we have called ‘surge capability’. The surge capacity should come from Civil Defence and emergency management leaders. They should be properly trained including in ‘judgement and decision-making’. There are no schools that currently teach that in this country.

## **Training**

Our submission suggested that there needed to be a system of centralised civil defence training re-established in New Zealand.

MCDEM should re-open the civil defence training school that once existed in New Zealand. The surge capacity needs leadership training for situations which are overwhelming. The problem with modern training is that it doesn’t deal with situations where resources and capability to respond are overwhelmed, and doesn’t teach understanding of judgement with limited information.

Since the 2010/11 earthquakes, a new and comprehensive Controller’s Training Programme has been established and run out of Massey University.

This is a three-stage programme commencing with a six- to eight-week course of self-directed study supported with an online series of videos, exercises, resources and networking forum with the training cohort. This is followed by a week-long residential component of lectures, presentations and exercises, and is followed up with a personal development plan and learning journal.

While this is an excellent course, there are concerns from smaller councils about the cost and time commitment required from their staff with CDEM functions.

MCDEM should be tasked and funded to deliver a national civil defence and emergency management (CDEM) training programme for both CDEM professionals and prospective volunteers. CDEM leaders, specifically MCDEM, need to be operationally focused, and engaged in training and capability building, establishing minimal requirements for councils and utilities for compliance with the Act, and implementing compliance audits.

## **Risk reduction**

The CDEM system is wholly focused on the improvement of emergency preparedness and response. In our view, risk reduction initiatives can substantially reduce the impact of natural events on communities and should be an important and mandated part of CDEM processes.

The Act requires utilities to be resilient, but there is no systematic assessment of utility resilience, nor of the resilience of utility systems.

Furthermore, one of the most serious deficiencies in the current CDEM system is the lack of incentives and process to enable lifeline utilities to be more resilient and to improve the resilience of their networks.

Utilities should be encouraged to deal with these issues as building resilient systems can involve quite different programmes than building more capacity or the replacement of ageing assets, and interdependency issues between utilities can significantly threaten emergency responses.

The establishment of agreed service targets after a disaster would provide a basis for planning the improvements required.

The engineering profession would like to see a rational and measured approach to the defence of communities from natural disaster and other emergencies and detailed consideration of a wider range of risk reduction programmes.

## **Governance**

The placement of MCDEM within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet diminishes the status of the Director. It is considered MCDEM would be better placed within a ‘practising’ Ministry. The ‘maximum autonomy’ status of the Director should be reinstated with direct and unequivocal reporting to the Minister. The appointment of the Director should reflect the decision-making powers implied by this – it is a practising role – not an oversight or policy role.

The Act has a number of provisions for setting expectations, monitoring progress and giving direction – the CDEM groups have been unwilling to exercise these and the provisions and the accountabilities need to be made more explicit.

The requirements on lifeline utilities need to be reinforced and the notion of ‘best endeavours’ disposed of – it is not a condition under the Act – neither is the notion of ‘force majeure’. MCDEM needs to take a more pro-active role in monitoring this, and to do so it needs a utility specialist within its capabilities.

The role and accountability of Government Ministries under the Act should be strengthened and made more explicit. The monitoring role of MCDEM everywhere needs to be strengthened and MCDEM made more accountable. **WNZ**