Sir, I would like to express my concerns regarding the current and future role of the three BOP New Zealand Response Teams (15,16 and 17).

The role of the response teams is an item on the agenda of this meeting under Section 3 (p28).

I have significant concerns that in considering the response teams, this group has not taken on board the lessons learned from the Christchurch earthquakes. I am also concerned that by taking the very limited view of the role and utility of the response teams, this group is taking an approach that has significant dangers for the ability of this group to respond to events either local or distant.

The future role development of the NZ-RT’s was discussed within the official review into the CDEM Response to the 22 February Christchurch Earthquake. This report was published on 29 June 2012 and stated amongst other things...**”*CDEM volunteers and the New Zealand Response Teams played a useful role in specific areas of the response”***.

***“The role of CDEM community organisations was primarily through the volunteers .... and the New Zealand Response Teams, who all performed well. (Page 179)***

***The New Zealand Response Teams trained for light rescue are also part of the community CDEM structure. This organisation mobilised and performed a multitude of tasks, for example, relating to access to damaged buildings (Page 176).***

***NZ USAR needs to understand and acknowledge how these teams can enhance the search and rescue effort in order to better employ these teams during future operations and enhance the national search and rescue capability. (Page 87)***

The following recommendation was made on page 88 of the report:

***“NZ USAR gain a better understanding of the capabilities of the New Zealand Response Teams and better integrate them into domestic training and operations where appropriate.”***

A Corrective Action Plan was released in December 2012 and designed to tackle the recommendations made in the review.

***4.3 The report encourages NZFS to consider more flexible operational control and tasking arrangements for USAR deployments as well as a greater understanding of the capabilities of New Zealand Response Teams with a view to larger integration into operations.***

The reference in the first agenda item concerns the national approach to the NZ-RT’s. The content of this section demonstrates how little progress has been made in this regard in the intervening years since the report was issued.

Whilst the national approach to the NZ-RT’s is outside the scope of this meeting, this national approach should be necessity inform the local approach. Instead, the local group has conducted the gap analysis referred to in the second part of item 3 of the agenda.

This gap analysis was based on the premise of business as usual (BAU) in terms of emergency service activity. This is a faulty premise.

Major incidents, from whatever source (weather related, natural disaster, or terrorist related) are not ‘business as usual’ scenarios. They typically provide a very high surge in requests for assistance over a very short period of time, which threatens to overwhelm existing resources.

The response teams provide an effective means of adding significant surge capacity to the other emergency services in an extreme situation.

Surge capacity in this context is the ability of the group or emergency service (eg FENZ) to increase local response capabilities in response to an event that stretches needs significantly beyond business as usual.

The greatest example of this was of course the response effort to the Christchurch Earthquake of Feb 2011. The local RT’s significantly enhanced the local surge capacity and were used extensively during the first hours, while national resources were being mobilised.

This capability was not only utilised in Christchurch. Multiple teams have provided increased capacity and capability to the responses to the Kaikoura earthquake, the Edgecumbe flood events locally and more recently, the Nelson bush fire response. This is in addition to numerous local storm and flooding and other rescue related events requiring the teams skill sets.

Whilst the Response Teams are not intended to supplement other emergency services in a BAU situation they are perfectly capable of doing so in a number of potential scenarios. Local team capabilities include rope and swift water rescue, both of which are important regional assets. For example, there is no need to bring a FENZ rope team from Hamilton at great cost to the taxpayer, when the local team is available at very short notice.

The NZ-RT’s are manned by well trained, experienced and dedicated volunteers who deserve to be supported and encouraged by the local authorities that they support.

It is said that the lesson of history is that people do not learn the lessons of history. The lessons on how to use the NZ-RT’s were learned following Christchurch. However developments in recent years have shown that there is no desire within either FENZ, or this group to take those lessons on board.

The attitude of this group towards the NZ-RT’s is at best one of indifference. This attitude has real dangers for the future of the teams and the capability of the region to respond to a major event.

I strongly urge this group to express clearly and unequivocally its support for the NZ-RT’s, to recognise and utilise the capabilities that they have and to push for a closer relationship with the emergency services, especially FENZ.

Regards

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