

FILE:99/6355/P1  
REF: EMA/197/04

22 June 2004

Ms Sue Holmes  
Inquiry Research Manager  
Study Into Reform of Building Regulations  
Productivity Commission  
PO Box 80  
BELCONNEN ACT 2616



**Australian Government**  
**Attorney-General's Department**  
Emergency Management Australia

24 JUN 2004

Dear Ms Holmes

### **EMA SUPPORT FOR THE AUSTRALIAN BUILDING CODES BOARD (ABCB)**

I understand you are interested in obtaining a perspective from Emergency Management Australia (EMA) on our relationship with, and the significance of, the Australian Building Codes Board in emergency management. I provide the following for your information.

EMA is the federal agency responsible for reducing the impact of natural and human-caused disasters on the Australian Community, and is the primary organisation through which a whole-of-government approach to emergency management is coordinated.

In this capacity, EMA has worked very closely with the Australian Building Codes Board in developing disaster mitigation strategies to protect Australian communities. The cost of disasters in Australia is increasing. This trend results from a variety of factors, including: population growth, the expansion of building development and other infrastructure in hazard-prone areas, and the movement of people to vulnerable coastal areas of northern Australia.

While we cannot ignore the need for effective response and recovery capabilities, emergency management practice in Australia is shifting its focus towards the prevention and mitigation end of the spectrum and a greater understanding of infrastructure and community resilience to hazards and disasters. It is within this realm that the work of the Australian Building Codes Board has come to the fore. Building standards are used to provide the first level of risk control to minimise exposure to hazards and reduce the magnitude of future risk.

The ABCB has, for many years, vigorously pursued the development of building codes, policies, standards and guidelines to lessen the risk of damage to property from fire, earthquake and high wind, including cyclones. There is no doubt that the net effect of this work has been a significant reduction in the potential damage caused to buildings by natural forces.

Damaging urban flood events occur every year in Australia. Extreme flood and storm surge events have the potential to cause building failure and the implications of safety for the inhabitants of such buildings are clear. The need for building regulations to overcome the problem is currently being addressed by the ABCB and at ABCB meeting 35, the Board agreed that, in accordance with the normal BCA amendment protocol, a Regulation Document and Regulation Impact Statement be produced on proposed

**EMA** *'safer sustainable communities'*

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amendments to BCA96 for flood protection of buildings. The development of a building code for flood will be welcomed by the emergency management sector.

While the past and current work conducted by the ABCB has been a most valuable contribution to Australian disaster mitigation efforts, it is their future involvement in the recent reform commitments arising from the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) review of natural disaster relief and mitigation arrangements that will make a major contribution to disaster prevention and mitigation in this country.

In December 2003, COAG gave in-principle approval to the recommendations of the report, *Natural Disasters in Australia: Reforming Mitigation, Relief and Recovery Arrangements*. This meant that all levels of government agreed to a comprehensive five-year package of twelve reform commitments to change the way Australia manages natural disasters and achieve safer, more sustainable communities. The following Reform Commitment specifically refers to building control regimes and this is where the ABCB will become further involved:

*4. take action to ensure more effective statutory State, Territory and local government land use planning, development and building control regimes that systematically identify natural hazards and includes measures to reduce the risk of damage from these natural hazards.*

The Report also stresses the importance of the resilience of the built environment in promoting human safety, reducing damage costs and allowing business continuity when disasters occur, and emphasises that the building industry has a role in promoting natural hazard awareness in the industry and a culture of compliance with building codes and standards. It also indicates that the role of the Commonwealth Government in natural disaster management is to provide national leadership in collaborative action across all levels of government in mitigation policy and practice and to assist with "mainstreaming" disaster mitigation. It specifically identifies the following as matters that need attention through mainstreaming:

- Requirements for major government and private infrastructure to be designed and constructed to withstand natural hazard impacts and;
- The incorporation of robust hazard codes into building standards.

Of even greater relevance to the future role of the ABCB are the following series of recommendations that clearly outline the important role that the ABCB will play in advancing disaster mitigation:

#### **Recommendation 16**

- That the Australian Building Codes Board assign priority and resources to ensure that the Building Code of Australia includes acceptable levels of building construction and performance for resistance to natural hazards (including high winds, storm, cyclone, flood, storm surge, landslip, bushfire and earthquake) and introduce appropriate Australian Standards and/or guidelines to support such standards of building construction performance.

#### **Recommendation 17**

- That the Australian Building Codes Board assign priority and resources to develop comprehensive guidelines, supported by education and training, for building in areas susceptible to natural hazards, including high winds. Storm, cyclone, flood, storm surge, landslip, bushfire and earthquake.

#### **Recommendation 21**

- That Commonwealth, state and territory ministers responsible for planning and building consider sponsoring professional and industry awards for best practice in natural hazard land use planning and building design and construction.

Disaster resilient structures can be achieved through more stringent building controls and subsequent fundamental improvements to the built environment. The Council of Australian Governments has placed improved building controls firmly on the disaster mitigation agenda and by doing so, has verified the important role that the ABCB will play in bringing about the necessary change. Robust partnerships between key agencies will be essential. The partnership that currently exists between EMA and the ABCB is a long standing and very productive one. It is vitally important to the safety of the Australian community that this partnership continues to flourish.

Should you require any further information, please contact David Winterburn on (02) 6256 4609 or e-mail: [david.winterburn@ema.gov.au](mailto:david.winterburn@ema.gov.au)

I have forwarded a copy of this letter to Mr Ivan Donaldson, Executive Director, Australian Building Codes Board.

Yours sincerely,



**David Templeman**  
Director General