Case Study - Exercise Mass Move 25 – Northwest and Southwest Metropolitan Regions

Exercise need

Exercise Heatwave Mass Move 25 was held at the Warragamba Dam Visitors Centre on 28 November 2025. The exercise involved Regional Emergency Management Committee (REMC) members from both Northwest and Southwest Sydney along with several observers from other NSW Government agencies. The scenario was based on a severe weather event involving sustained rainfall across the state leading to severe flooding on the Hawkesbury, Nepean and Georges River systems. The development of an East Coast Low will make this flooding even more severe.

The exercise was designed to explore aspects of the draft Major Evacuation Centre (MEC) Guidelines such as:

- Pre-activation considerations
- Request for activation of the MEC
- The appointment of the MEC Controller
- The MEC IMT
- Communication and coordination.

This was the first time that an exercise using the newly released draft Major Evacuation Centre Guideline had been conducted. The exercise highlighted that several complexities are associated with the activation, establishment, resourcing and managing of a MEC, especially during a period of an initiating natural event.

Exercise aim

The aim of the exercise was to test and build understanding of the draft Major Evacuation Centre Guidelines by exploring key considerations for pre-activation, activation requests, appointment of the MEC Controller, establishment of the MEC Incident Management Team (IMT), and communication and coordination arrangements during a large-scale evacuation event.

Exercise objectives

- **Exercise** the application and effectiveness of the MEC decision-making tools outlined in the MEC guidelines.
- **Consider** the appointment process and functional operation of the MEC Controller and Incident Management Team (IMT) roles.
- **Validate** the suitability of the governance arrangements in the MEC Guidelines, including coordination across local, regional and state levels.

Exercise outcomes

The exercise was intended to identify the requirements for the effective activation and operation of a Major Evacuation Centre, confirm lead time, leadership, staffing and coordination requirements, identify key risks and constraints, and inform further refinement of the draft Major Evacuation Centre Guidelines. including risks related to access constraints, resourcing pressures and the coordination of public information during large-scale evacuation events. For example, participants identified that access to Sydney Olympic Park may be significantly constrained during flooding, with key arterial routes impacted and requiring detailed traffic planning.

Exercise evaluation

The exercise was evaluated through a **facilitated, discussion-based workshop** using a hypothetical flood scenario to test the draft **Major Evacuation Centre (MEC) Guidelines**

Insight/Lesson	Sustain/ Improve
Activation of a Major Evacuation Centre requires substantial lead time, with participants indicating at least 72 hours may be needed to establish the centre effectively.	Improve
Effective MEC leadership will require a senior officer with command experience, clear authority and access to appropriate financial delegations.	Improve
Resourcing a MEC alongside multiple local evacuation centres may exceed available agency capacity and requires a clear operating model.	Improve
Access to Sydney Olympic Park is a significant operational risk, particularly during flooding, congestion and concurrent major events.	Improve
Public information arrangements for a MEC are complex and must align combat agency messaging, community information and information provided to people within the centre.	Improve
MEC planning must account for extended human habitation, impacts on nearby health infrastructure and the need for different IMT structures across activation and operational phases.	Improve

Participants also noted that evacuation volumes and demand for services could exceed initial planning assumptions, placing additional pressure on transport networks, shelter capacity, and public information arrangements.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the exercise observations and feedback

- The Public Information team should be included within the MEC planning working group to provide a specific communication and information perspective.
- A specific Traffic and Transport Management Plan to access Sydney Olympic Park needs to be developed to support the Major Evacuation Centre Guidelines.
- Guidelines for accessing Sydney Olympic Park during periods when it is occupied by other events needs to be established and agreed.
- Funding arrangements for the establishment and operation of the MEC need to be agreed and documented.
- Supporting guidelines need to be developed to ensure that Sydney Olympic Park is properly repurposed to cater for extended human habitation.
- An agreed philosophy for the continued operation or cessation of other smaller evacuation centres when a MEC is established needs to be developed and agreed. This needs to also consider the ability for agencies to staff the MEC and alongside other evacuation centres that may be operating.
- Appendix 1 Decision-making tool to be updated to include considerations such as:
    - Whether functional areas have sufficient resources to staff a MEC.
    - The anticipated lead time for the smaller evacuation centres to reach their capacity.
    - Traffic management planning and lead times to implement solutions.
    - Impact on surrounding infrastructure if a MEC is opened.
- Procedures need to be developed to ensure that the 72-hour lead time for the activation of the MEC can be met.
- Guidelines for Public Information during a period of MEC operation need to be developed. These need to be developed in conjunction with combat agencies who may

have operations underway at the same time as the MEC is being established and operational.

- The establishment of the MEC will have a flow on effect to the adjoining health infrastructure (e.g. hospitals). MEC planning needs to consider the impact from other evacuated hospitals and nursing homes on existing health facilities adjacent to the MEC.
- Draft IMT structures and target resources need to be developed for the Activation, Operations and Stand-down phases of the MEC.