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Australian Maritime Safety Authority

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Exercise Big Splash tests aviation disaster plans

A discussion exercise to test the preparedness of Australian authorities responding to a major commercial aviation disaster has highlighted the need for absolute cooperation between the many federal and state agencies that would be involved in such a recovery operation.

Some 18 Australian Government departments, five NSW government agencies and several private sector organisations have spent two days testing the operating procedures of the Commonwealth Aviation Disaster Response Plan (CAVDISPLAN).

The Canberra exercise was led jointly by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) and Emergency Management Australia (EMA), and involved more than 50 people.

"This is the first time that CAVDISPLAN has been fully exercised since it was drawn up in 2003," said the Attorney General Philip Ruddock, whose department is responsible for the National Emergency Management Coordination Centre at EMA, where the recovery from an aviation disaster would be coordinated.

Mark Vaile, the Minister responsible for AMSA that facilitates the Rescue Coordination Centre Australia, said it was essential that each agency understood their own role and had an appreciation for the roles of other agencies involved in such an incident. "It is necessary to transition from Search and Rescue (SAR) activities into a whole-of-government operation effectively, to enable the most appropriate response and recovery."

The exercise scenario was based upon a fictitious commercial airliner ditching in the ocean off Australia's coastline. The first day of the exercise focused on the aviation and maritime resources necessary for the rescue, whilst the second day tested onshore coordination procedures across many agencies.

The organisations involved in the discussion exercise will now evaluate their participation and examine ways of enhancing the current arrangements for any such aviation disaster.

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