

REGIONAL CAPITALS AUSTRALIA

2019-20 BUSHFIRE ISSUES PAPER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regional Capitals Australia (RCA) conducted a survey of its members to gather information on the impact of the recent bushfires.

Councils reported damage to bushland/native vegetation, primary production, public infrastructure and community facilities due to the bushfires; however, only one council has quantified the cost of the damage.

By far the greatest pressure on regional councils was on council staff, but significant pressure was also placed on the water supply, housing, airports and hospitals.

The majority of councils provided emergency assistance and coordination of activities through staff and public statements from the mayor. Councils also provided community facilities along with heavy equipment for bushfire support and firefighting. In the recovery phase, the focus of councils was on liaison and coordination assistance as well as advocacy for additional resources.

Regional councils responded almost unanimously that disaster grants were the priority for federal government assistance and should be the focus of RCA's advocacy. Small business stimulus and tourism promotion were also high on the priority list.

Other significant issues identified by the survey include; the role of the ADF in bushfire response and recovery periods, the importance of collaboration between adjoining councils, addressing communications blackspots, protection of catchment areas supplying drinking water and resolving cross-border issues including communications and non-alignment of disaster relief payments.

Detailed Findings

Fifteen of RCA's 22-member councils responded to the February 2020 Bushfire Impact Survey. It should be noted that the number of responses to individual survey questions ranged from one to 15.

About one-quarter of responding councils (4 of 15) reported that their **LGA** had been exposed to a major bushfire in the past six months; however, 45 percent (5 of 11) of respondents said their **region** had been exposed to a major bushfire in the past six months.

Bushfire Damage

Of the eight responses to the question regarding the type of damage that had occurred in their LGA, half reported damage to bushland and conservation areas, while three reported damage to primary production, two to dwellings and one to each of community facilities and public infrastructure. Other reported damage included water supply contamination and impacts on local business and community activities from smoke. Three responses reported no damage.

Only one of five respondents reported that they have an estimate of the damage in their LGA and only one of five respondents reported that damage to public infrastructure would be recoverable. On the question of how damage to public infrastructure would be recovered, the one respondent indicated that it would be through disaster recovery grants or other means.

Recommendation: Regional councils should prepare estimates of damage to support requests for assistance from state and federal governments.

Impact on resources during and after bushfires

Councils reported that by far the greatest pressure on them during the bushfires was on council staff, but significant pressure was also placed on the water supply, housing, airports, roads and hospitals.

Where an LGA or its surrounding region was impacted by the fires, the majority of councils responded during the emergency phase by providing council staff assistance, statements from the mayor, heavy equipment support and community

facilities. Councils also coordinated and resourced volunteers, provided masks, supported local relief centres and collaborated with adjoining councils. When fires were on National Park land there was less direct involvement and more of a watching brief role.

In the recovery phase, the majority of respondents see their major role in liaison and coordination assistance in the recovery efforts, as well as advocacy for additional resources. At the LGA level, liaison and assistance for community resilience is another important activity. Other responsibilities include processing of increased planning approval applications, coordination of ADF resources and ensuring safety of the transport network.

Emergency response

Councils were almost unanimous in reporting that strong collaboration and coordination were the successes of the bushfire emergency response in their regions. In particular, they emphasised the importance of coordination and support between adjoining councils. Other reported successes included the co-location of the Incident Management Team and Emergency Operations Centre, and the support provided to firefighters by community volunteers.

Gaps identified in the emergency response included the limited capacity of small councils to deal with emergencies, difficulty in transitioning the Incident Management Team Command from one LGA to the next as fires crossed LGA boundaries, lack of coordination of cross border communications between councils, and non-alignment of disaster relief payments

Recommendation: Update cross border policies and ensure alignment

Economic impact

The majority of respondent councils reported the bushfires would impact their LGA and regional economies, with the greatest impact on primary production, tourism, retail and services.

Respondents also identified longer term regional economic impacts on employment and the attraction and retention of residents, with concern that some residents may not return or rebuild in bushfire affected areas.

Recovery

The majority of councils expect recovery will take one or two years, although one council reported that it would take up to ten years.

Regional councils responded almost unanimously that disaster grants were the priority for assistance from the federal government. Small business stimulus and tourism promotion were also high on the priority list. These should be the focus of the RCA's advocacy activities.

Respondents also proposed that RCA's advocacy priorities include:

- Funding for economic stimulation and support for disaster recovery
- Funding to restore public infrastructure
- Long-term support
- Assistance with fencing and farm restocking
- Assistance for business
- Resolution of cross-border inconsistencies NSW/VIC relating to disaster relief payments
- National disaster status declarations
- Communications/media black spots in cross border regions
- Stimulus packages

National Bushfire Response Framework

Councils proposed that the creation of a national policy include:

1. Economic support, including tourism
2. Wide-ranging consultation with all stakeholders, particularly at a local level
3. Identification of the use of ADF resources transitioning from response to recovery
4. Funding for more council emergency management staff
5. Consistent standards across Australia
6. Greater focus on protecting water catchment areas providing drinking water to major centres

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

There has been a significant response to the 2019-20 bushfires, including both funding and policy activity, from both the Australian and State Governments. These include Disaster Recovery Funding, the establishment of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency and the \$2 billion National Bushfire Recovery Fund, a Royal Commission and agreements on actions by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

Actions by the Australian Government are summarised below. There are a wide range of payments and assistance available to those impacted by bushfires, and the range of Australian Government programs are summarised on the National Bushfire Recovery Agency website at <https://www.bushfirerecovery.gov.au/recovery-assistance>

However, the total range of assistance available to those affected is confusing and difficult to assess due to the duplication and/or addition of payments and programs at the State Government level. While State Government assistance is obviously very welcome, the information about assistance in some states is often not presented clearly. Applicants may be directed to different websites depending on their status (individual, primary producer, small business etc) and there is sometimes a lack of clarity on whether a single payment, a joint payment or two different payments (i.e. Australian Government and/or State Government payment) are available and from whom.

Recommendation: That at an individual State and Commonwealth level, all Governments adopt a consistent, simple, central website/source approach for the provision of information about disaster funding. Websites should capture in one place, the range of assistance available to each type of applicant, including both separate State and Commonwealth grant and assistance programs.

SUMMARY OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE COAG RESPONSE

Outcomes of COAG meeting – 13 March 2020

- Implementation of a **National Bushfire Recovery Plan** spanning social, built, natural and economic recovery, and including local economic recovery plans for the most-impacted regions. This Plan builds on existing initiatives, including support to small businesses and primary producers, which is being rolled out in fire-affected areas.
- Review and update how governments apply **Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements** to streamline processes and ensure Australians impacted by the same disaster have equitable access to recovery assistance, irrespective of what side of a border they are.
- Endorsement of the **National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework** and Emergency Management Ministers to develop a **National Action Plan** to implement the framework in consultation with other COAG councils and forums. The Framework recognises that building resilience to natural disasters requires co-ordinated action from all governments, together with the private sector and communities. A new \$261 million Commonwealth-State partnership agreement will fund implementation of risk reduction initiatives in-line with the framework.
- Three streams of **risk reduction work**:
 - improving the resilience of the national telecommunications network;
 - asking the Building Ministers' Forum to consider how to adapt the built environment to future climate and hazard conditions; and
 - asking the Australian Data and Digital Council, in consultation with the Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management, to improve national natural hazard data and intelligence to enable the development of new information products such as a national fire map.

Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements and other Australian Government support

The **Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA)** replaced the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) on 1 November 2018.

Under the DRFA, the Australian Government gives state governments funding to help cover the costs of:

- some disaster relief
- recovery assistance measures, including Reconstruction of Essential Public Assets (REPA).

The DRFA funding is the source of concern about potential inequity of access to recovery assistance by those impacted by the same disaster, depending on which state they are in.

Australian Government payments are listed below. Individual State Governments also have their own payments, however the nature of funding agreements and the distribution of Australian Government funding by State Governments make it difficult to disaggregate and have clarity on the sources of funding.

- **Australian Government Disaster recovery payment (Centrelink)** - \$1,000 per eligible adult and \$800 for each eligible child under 16 years of age for Australian residents significantly affected by a declared disaster. This is a one-off payment only.
- **Disaster recovery allowance (Centrelink)** - up to 13 weeks to a maximum of the equivalent rate of Newstart or Youth Allowance, based on your circumstances for Australian independent residents in a bushfire-affected area who have suffered a loss of income as a direct result of the bushfires.
- **Recovery Grant (Small Business)** – up to \$50,000 for small businesses and not-for-profit organisations in fire affected Local Government Areas.
- **Recovery Grant (Primary Producers)** - Grants of up to \$75,000. This includes the \$15,000 grant available to primary producers under Category C arrangements.

- **Concessional loans** – up to \$500,000 for small businesses (including primary producers) and not-for-profit organisations in fire affected Local Government Areas.
- **New \$10,000 grants for small businesses** - funded by the Australian Government, for small businesses in selected fire-affected Local Government Areas, as determined by state governments.
- **Tax Relief Assistance** - Businesses in identified bushfire-impacted postcodes are eligible for support and assistance through the Australian Taxation Office (ATO).
- **Regional Tourism Bushfire Recovery Grants - Regional Events** – up to \$30,000 for local government authorities and regional tourism organisations operating in bushfire affected areas receiving Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) assistance.
- **Bushfire clean up assistance** - The Australian Government is working with the NSW, VIC and SA governments to share the cost of clean-up for residential and commercial properties destroyed by this season’s bushfires.

National Bushfire Recovery Agency

The National Bushfire Recovery Agency (NBRA) was established by the Prime Minister in January 2020, to lead and coordinate a national response to rebuilding communities affected by bushfire.

The Agency is responsible for administering the **\$2 billion National Bushfire Recovery Fund** over the next two years. This funding is in addition to other services and support available under existing natural disaster support mechanisms. It will work closely with state and local government agencies and key stakeholders to integrate recovery and rebuilding activities and will work directly with communities to enable local solutions to local issues.

The Agency will be led by former Australian Federal Policy Commissioner, Andrew Colvin, and report to the Australian Minister for Natural Disaster and Emergency Management. The Agency’s immediate priorities include:

- primary producer grants for immediate and urgent recovery needs

- additional support for small business
- grants to bushfire affected Local Government Areas
- a mental health package for first responders and communities
- support to attract tourists back to the regions
- infrastructure projects to support economic, community and industry recovery and resilience, and
- support for the environment and native wildlife.

Australian Government mental health response to bushfire trauma

\$76 million of Australian Government funding will provide distress counselling and mental health support for individuals, families and communities affected by bushfires (services available from 17 January 2020 until December 2021), comprising:

- \$44.3 million for counselling and psychological services for people on the fire fronts:
 - \$10.5 million for immediate counselling
 - \$29.6 million for ongoing psychological support, including telehealth
 - \$4.2 million for Primary Health Networks for additional mental health services
- \$5.7 million for trauma informed care and care coordination:
 - Delivery of trauma informed care to people on the fire fronts (\$2m)
 - Support for bushfire trauma response coordinators (\$3.2m)
 - National Cross-Service Framework (\$500,000)
- \$2.7 million community grants helping communities recover.
- \$16 million supporting emergency services workers and their families.
- \$7.4 million supporting youth through headspace:
 - Funding of \$300,000 to headspace centres in fire affected areas (\$3m)
 - Expand the planned Batemans Bay headspace site and expedite funding (\$4.4m)

The Australian Government will create a **Bushfire Recovery Access Program** to provide immediate and ongoing free counselling and support to individuals, families and emergency services workers affected by the bushfires.

Tourism recovery package

The Australian Government has released a \$76 million tourism recovery package focused on protecting jobs, small businesses and local economies by helping to get tourists travelling across the nation again.

- \$20 million for a nationally coordinated domestic marketing initiative
- \$25 million for a global marketing campaign to drive international visitation
- \$10 million for [Regional Tourism Bushfire Recovery Grants](#), an Austrade administered events initiative across bushfire affected areas
- \$9.5 million for an international media and travel trade hosting initiative
- \$6.5 million to support tourism business' attendance at the largest annual tourism trade event, the [Australian Tourism Exchange](#)
- \$5 million for our diplomatic network to educate that our tourism, international education and export sectors are open for business.

Volunteer Firefighters

Australian Government will provide support for Volunteer firefighters who are eligible, of up to \$6,000 per person, to provide for lost income.

COMMUNITY CHILD CARE FUND

\$5 million for the **Community Child Care Fund (CCCF)** will be used to support recovery efforts for child care services in communities affected by the recent bushfire disaster.

The funding will ensure child care services in fire affected areas remain viable, and help pay for things like the replacement of damaged playground equipment, or wages for affected staff.

Assistance from the Australian Defence Force

ADF personnel have been working with state and territory authorities since September 2019 in response to Australia's bushfire crisis and this support will continue for as long as needed. The bushfire crisis remains the ADF's primary focus. Around 4,300 ADF personnel are supporting Operation Bushfire Assist. This includes around 1,100 reservists.

ADF efforts are also being supported by more than 196 international military representatives.

Local Government Areas (LGAs) Grants Package

To help the most severely bushfire-impacted councils to quickly rebuild vital infrastructure and strengthen their community's resilience, the Australian Government is providing initial and immediate payments to affected councils.

Under this Package, 43 councils have been provided \$1 million lump sum payments.

Wildlife and habitat restoration

The Australian Government is providing an initial \$50 million for emergency wildlife and habitat recovery. This package will provide immediate support to protect wildlife, and work with scientists, ecologists, communities and land managers to plan the longer-term protection and restoration effort.

- \$25 million for an emergency intervention fund to help with the immediate survival of affected animals, plants and ecological communities, and to control pests and weeds.
- \$25 million to support wildlife rescue, our zoos, Natural Resource Management groups, Greening Australia and Conservation Volunteers Australia with on the ground activities. This will include:
 - up to \$7 million for Natural Resource Management groups in bushfire affected areas to carry out emergency interventions
 - up to \$7.5 million to support on-ground wildlife rescue, protection and care services
 - up to \$5 million for Greening Australia to increase supply of seed and native plants for revegetation
 - up to \$3 million for Taronga Zoo, Zoos South Australia and Zoos Victoria for treatment of injured wildlife and the establishment of insurance populations of at-risk species. This is in addition to the \$3 million committed in late 2019 to support Queensland Koala Hospitals and the \$3 million for koala habitat restoration in northern NSW and south-east Queensland
 - up to \$2.5 million for Conservation Volunteers Australia to mobilise volunteers through a national coordination point.

National Royal Commission into Black Summer Bushfires

The Australian Government has established a national **Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements** following the devastating Black Summer bushfires.

This inquiry has a national focus and will look at three key areas:

- Improving natural disaster management coordination across all levels of government;
- Improving Australia's preparedness, resilience, and response to natural disasters, across all levels of government;
- The legal framework for the Commonwealth's involvement in responding to national emergencies and how that works with state and territory legal frameworks.

Australian Government Response by timeframe

Timeframe	Action
Short-term (1-3 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australian Government Disaster recovery payment (Centrelink) • Disaster Recovery Allowance (Centrelink) • Australian Government Mental Health Response to bushfire trauma • Support for volunteer firefighters • Community Childcare Fund (CCCF) • Local Government Areas Grants packages • Emergency Wildlife and Habitat Recovery Fund
Medium-term (3-12 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk reduction work to improve resilience of national telecommunications network, adapt built environment to future climate and hazard conditions; and national natural hazard data and intelligence to enable the development of new information products such as a national fire map. • Recovery Grant (Small Business) • Recovery Grant (Primary Producer) • Concessional Loans • New \$10,000 grants for small businesses • Tax Relief Assistance • Regional Tourism Bushfire Recovery Grants – Regional Events • Bushfire Clean up Assistance • National Bushfire Recovery Agency & National Bushfire Recovery Fund • Australian Government Mental Health Response to bushfire trauma • Tourism Recovery Package (dependant on Coronavirus recovery period) • Community Childcare Fund (CCCF) • Emergency Wildlife and Habitat Recovery Fund

<p>Long-term</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of a National Bushfire Recovery Plan • Review and update how governments apply Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements • Development of a National Action Plan to implement the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework • National Bushfire Recovery Agency & National Bushfire Recovery Fund • Australian Government Mental Health Response to bushfire trauma • Tourism Recovery Package (dependant on Coronavirus recovery period) • National Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements
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Case Study: South Australian Government Response

By way of illustration about confusion surrounding Australian and State Government payments, below is a summary of measures undertaken by the South Australian State Government, drawn from <https://dhs.sa.gov.au/services/disaster-recovery>

As can be seen, some payments acknowledge Australian Government funding and some appear to be state specific versions of a payment, while others appear to be the same payment that the Australian Government is offering.

- **SA Bushfire Appeal** - to raise funds for people directly affected by bushfires. Donations go to State Emergency Relief Fund and those affected can apply to the Fund.
- **Primary Producer Recovery Grant** – up to \$75,000 for Primary producers affected by the bushfires to assist with the immediate costs of rebuilding and recovery.
- **Small Business Bushfire Recovery Grant** – up to \$50,000 for small businesses affected by the bushfires for immediate costs associated with clean-up, restoration and rebuilding.
- **Re-establishment Grants** - up to \$20,000 to help people who are uninsured, and whose principal residence (home) has been damaged by bushfire, to repair bushfire-damaged homes or replace essential household items.
- **Sporting Club Grants** – up to \$10,000 for Sporting clubs affected by the bushfires.
- **Free home battery** – for South Australian who lost and are rebuilding their homes after the bushfires.
- **Concessional loans for small businesses, primary producers and non-profit organisations** - concessional loan of up to \$500,000 for eligible businesses to restore and replace assets and property that have been significantly damaged in the fires. *Jointly-funded by the State and Commonwealth Governments under Disaster Recovery Arrangements.*
- **Landscape Recovery Grants (Natural Resources SA)** - up to \$5000 for landholders directly impacted by the Cudlee Creek fire, to undertake activities

to manage pest plants and animals, protect soils, manage water quality, and protect biodiversity.

- **Personal Hardship Emergency Grants** - South Australians directly affected by the fires can apply for a one-off emergency grant of up to \$700 per family, or \$280 per adult to assist with immediate, temporary relief. *Loans are jointly-funded by the State and Commonwealth Governments under Disaster Recovery Arrangements.*
- **Taxation Relief** - The SA Government is providing tax relief measures for people affected by the bushfires, including tax relief for the stamp duty payable on the purchase of replacement properties and motor vehicles, relief for 2019-2020 and 2020-21 land tax liabilities, and a hold on the Emergency Services Levy debt collection.
- **Waiver of state government administration fees** - the SA Government is waiving fees and charges for people affected by the bushfires including fees waived for replacement drivers licenses and births, deaths and marriage certificates for those who lost them as a result of the fires, refund of unexpired registrations for vehicles destroyed by bushfire, and applications being accepted to waive registration of replacement motor vehicles.
- **Local Recovery Centres and a Recovery Hotline** – in bushfire affected areas.

Other South Australian Government Action:

- **Clean-up of bushfire affected material** - the Federal and State governments are covering the costs of cleaning up material affected by South Australian bushfires in the 2019–20 summer, particularly asbestos, permaline (CCA-treated) timber and ash, and other chemicals.
- **Emotional Recovery** - Free professional telephone and online counselling for people 15 years and older living or working in regional South Australia.

Discussion and Observations

It is clear that there are a broad range of disaster recovery assistance measures available at both an Australian and State Government level, and commitment by all governments to review and implement reforms to disaster arrangements, from funding and recovery, to preparedness, mitigation and community resilience.

Government response to the 2019-2020 bushfire emergency in Australia must also now be placed in a wider context as the world is engulfed by the Coronavirus pandemic. Further, the bushfire emergency lends itself to broader considerations of Australia's changing climate and other disaster events such as floods and cyclones.

This means Councils have the opportunity to look beyond the immediate issues of bushfire recovery, towards their long term economic and community resilience.

Councils may also benefit from consideration of previous research on Australian disasters and recovery in the regional context.

In 2012, the Regional Australia Institute undertook research into the economic aspects of natural disaster recovery in Australia, with case studies of four towns affected by natural disasters involving cyclones, fires and floods, two in Queensland, Cardwell and Emerald; and two in Victoria, Carisbrook and Marysville.

Helping regions impacted by natural disaster to recovery and renew, Regional Policy Briefing, October 2013 and the *From Recovery to Renewal*, Case Study Reports, April 2013, identify many issues pertinent to the development of policy responses to the 2019-20 bushfires.

Local Area Recovery

Economic recovery is the foundation for community recovery and renewal. Without quick economic recovery, Councils risk population displacement as residents, particularly younger residents, and business owners and staff leave in search of jobs and security. Therefore, **helping local businesses to recover is the priority**.

To assist business recovery, Councils should focus on and lobby for quick restoration of essential services and infrastructure, and implement and lobby for programs to assist businesses to become operational again, to restore business

confidence and to mitigate post disaster stigma. All the while, Councils should be clear eyed about the state of the local economy, recognising both weaknesses and future opportunities.

In developing recovery responses, Councils need to engage the local community to harness its leadership and use its local knowledge.

Other regional and economic recovery

Regional Councils have a symbiotic relationship with their surrounding regions; they act as markets for the produce and products produced in the region, and provide services to the regional population, which in turns supplies the labour force for the town and is an important part of its consumer base.

Councils must recognise that the effects of a bushfire are not necessarily confined within an LGA, and that within the wider affected area, the impact might be of a different order, the rate of recovery uneven, and the assistance required for recovery, different. Therefore, **in assessing its recovery needs, Councils need to include assistance for the surrounding region in their lobbying strategy.**

Future Planning

It is important for future planning that Councils work to clarify their role in both the disaster event and the post-disaster recovery. This will involve ongoing discussions with all tiers of government, neighbouring councils and the community.

Councils should consider their role in facilitating the effective flow of grant monies to disaster and recovery recipients by providing information about grants and assistance to complete grant applications, and provide a business continuity manual for local business that will help prepare them for the future. One-stop shops have been found to be valuable, particularly in times of digital disruption, for providing both the information and assistance needed by those impacted by disasters.

Councils should also analyse grants programs, their application processes and eligibility criteria to ensure that there are no unintended consequences that diminish equitable access by those impacted. Issues for consideration might include:

- availability of grants for tenants, but not landlords (who have a role to play in providing housing in the post-recovery period);

- grants for those with a principal place of residence within the affected area, but not for part-time residents, who provide an economic contribution to the local economy;
- no grants for those who get up and running more quickly, before grants programs are announced or available;
- no grants for those businesses undamaged physically, but affected by surrounding damage, such as lack of access or destruction of tourism amenities; and
- the duration of grant programs, which may end before those who need support can begin the rebuilding and recovery process.

Other issues

The National Partnership on Disaster Risk Reduction was signed at the COAG meeting in March 2020, and a National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework was tabled. The Framework is particularly pertinent to Regional Capitals Australia because of its focus on the role of all sectors of society to make disaster risk-informed decisions; to be accountable for reducing risks within their control; and, to invest in reducing disaster risk to limit its costs.

Much of the work will focus on planning and development practices that will include issues from where to build infrastructure or locate public services and the design of public assets, to where to invest funds or even to buy a house. The identification of the highest disaster risks and their mitigation will involve the role of RCA councils and their communities.

Ensuring the capacity of RCA council decision makers and community leaders to make decisions about disaster risk policy, programs and investment should be a priority. In addition Councils will need to engage and empower communities, local businesses and individuals in these decisions about disaster risk reduction and future investment.