

## Estimates – Opening Statement

- Good afternoon, Committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to make a brief opening statement and for your interest in our work.
- As this is my first appearance at Estimates in this role, and the first for the NBRA, let me begin by acknowledging the tragic loss of 33 lives, and the enormous loss and destruction in the 2019-2020 Bushfire season, an event the scale of which we have not seen in this manner before and which has obviously led to the creation of this agency.
- On behalf of all members of the NBRA, let me
  - Pay my respects to the family and friends of the deceased.
  - I acknowledge that:
    - Over 3000 homes have been lost;
    - Over 12.6 million hectares burnt;
    - More than 7000 facilities and outbuildings lost;
    - We've seen a devastating impact on our wildlife and with our environmental losses more broadly, including potentially many millions of native animals and plants;
    - Estimated that as many as 100,000 head of livestock have been lost, but certainly more than 80,000 have been confirmed euthanised or lost in NSW, Vic and SA alone.
    - 19/20 bushfire season distinguishable by
      - its scale
      - the concurrency of multiple major bushfires.
- I want to acknowledge extraordinary volunteer response both during the fires and afterwards, this includes of course the firefighters who have been at the forefront of this for more than 6 months – but also the amazing work of volunteers who have manned recovery centres, cooked meals, provided respite and shelter, saved injured wildlife, repaired fences, cleaned homes – and the list goes on. This is all a very relevant part of the recovery process.

- I also want to acknowledge the ongoing work of our ADF colleagues who have, in many ways, kickstarted the community's recovery process. Everywhere I go, the ADF are singled out for special attention and thanks. Their efforts are not just the physical work they do and the tangible results that we see from it – but the word 'hope,' sometimes even 'confidence' and 'safety', are used by communities when they see the ADF uniform.
- The National Bushfire Recovery Agency was established by the Prime Minister on 6 January 2020.
  - We are an operationally independent agency, within Prime Minister & Cabinet
  - Our task is lead and coordinate a national response to the rebuilding efforts of communities impacted by these bushfires.
  - Focus on connecting people, communities, businesses and primary producers with services and assistance to rebuild and recover.
  - While the major levers at our disposal are at the Commonwealth level, a core task of this agency is to work with Federal, State & Local governments and non-government agencies as well as the local communities.
- It is now 8 weeks since the NBRA was established. In this time, members of the NBRA have travelled across NSW, Qld, Vic and SA.
- Personally, I have visited:
  - The Southern Highlands
  - The Blue Mountains
  - Central Queensland
  - The NSW South Coast
  - East Gippsland
  - Kangaroo Island

- The Adelaide Hills, and the
  - Snowy Valleys
- Each visit has been too quick to do the community and the devastation justice, but I am committed to visiting as many communities as possible – and of course our visits will be regular and ongoing. I have:
  - Heard harrowing stories of loss;
  - Heard inspirational stories of survival;
  - Spoken to volunteer fire fighters who have lost their own home while protecting the homes of others; and
  - Seen environmental destruction and regeneration, and witnessed the hope this regeneration has provided for communities.
- While the NBRA is still very new, and we are developing our internal guidance and policy, it is clear to me that a number of principles will define our work. Firstly, our work will be locally informed. This has been the lesson from every disaster that we have previously studied. Our work will have an enduring benefit for the long term of communities. Our work will be aligned with our stakeholders and our partners, and it will be focussed on the ease of access that the communities and individuals need to get access to the services provided.
- In the 8 weeks to date, we have been very busy – working with our partners, listening to the communities, and working with our government colleagues to ensure that measures are well designed, and can achieve the needs of the communities.
- We have worked hard to help communities and local governments with the immediate relief they need and:
  - More than 109,000 individuals have received payments and allowances totalling more than \$150m
  - \$60m has been provided to bushfire affected LGAs for immediate relief in the form of local infrastructure and community strengthening projects; and

- A \$76m package to provide mental health support services to firefighters, emergency personnel, individuals and communities impacted by the ongoing bushfire disaster.
  - It is something I am personally very focussed on – some of you would be aware from my previous role - and pleasingly something that has been raised with me almost everywhere I travel by the local community.
- In total, so far we assess that over \$380m has been rolled out under a range of measures. These efforts have so far been focussed on providing the immediate relief, but recovery is a marathon not a sprint, and our minds are clearly focussed on the longer term needs – economically, physically, socially and in terms of our environment and habitat.
- There's no doubt in my mind, as we begin the process to fully understand the impact this fire season has had, that this event has tested all levels of government and stretched our well-entrenched frameworks to manage the recovery. The duration of this event lasting 6 months alone has challenged the nature of the impacts in a manner that will now test our recovery efforts going forward, but we look forward to that challenge.
- My Deputies and I will do our best to answer the questions that you will have of us today.
  - I'm aware that a series of questions were notified to us at the end of last week, and we were told to expect them from one of the members, Senator Watt.
  - We are ready to answer those questions, noting that many of the measures we have stewardship of are actually administered by other departments.