

Good evening Senators.

I appear tonight as the Coordinator-General of the National Recovery and Resilience Agency (NRRA).

Since my appointment by Prime Minister Scott Morrison in March 2019, my Public Service role has seen a change of title and a change of Agency name and remit, but has effectively remained the same. That is: to ensure our fellow Australians, the survivors affected by disasters like floods, bushfires, cyclones, drought, and now the pandemic, are best served by the Australian Government and others over the ensuing days, months and years.

The NRRA has a broad remit. We are responsible for recovery, resilience and risk reduction efforts for natural disasters.

While we don't own drought policy, we are responsible for 'truth testing' this policy to make sure it works, and for supporting communities on the ground as they live through, recover from and prepare for the next drought.

We have also played a key role in the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The NRRA came into full effect on 1 July when we took on the disaster risk reduction and recovery functions from the Department of Home Affairs, and responsibility for the Rural Financial Counselling Network. The former National Bushfire Recovery Agency was folded into the Agency a few months prior.

The Government established the NRRA and the Australian Climate Service, and made enhancements to Emergency Management Australia (EMA), in response to recommendations from what's commonly referred to as the 'Bushfire Royal Commission'.

Our current work includes ongoing recovery from the 2019 North Queensland floods and 2019-20 Black Summer Bushfires, a large body of existing risk reduction activities and overseeing the design of complex new programs. We have direct responsibility for \$919 million in administered funding over the next 4 financial years, and another \$145 million for States and Territories paid through Treasury. Additionally, we're responsible

for demand driven programs that support disaster recovery, with over \$1 billion paid in 2020-21.

Our staff numbers are modest for the work we do. Almost a third of our 238 employees are based outside Canberra and of this, twenty percent are based in regional Australia.

The NRRRA's success is contingent on working with a wide range of stakeholders who play a vital disaster response, recovery and preparedness role, including EMA and State, Territory and local governments, industry and communities. Our collective efforts will lead to much better outcomes for Australians individually and the nation as a whole.

A good example of this collaboration is the high risk weather season briefings for each State and Territory, which EMA kicked off in September.¹ These were supported by the NRRRA, the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM), the Australian Defence Force and Services Australia. Among the topics covered were the seasonal outlook, natural disaster support arrangements, and the availability of Australian Government assets.

The NRRRA also works very closely with the States, Territories and key stakeholders to drive the implementation of the Bushfire Royal Commission recommendations. Of the 80 recommendations, the Commonwealth is either directly or jointly responsible for more than 50 and is making good progress. Half of the 15 recommendations it's directly responsible for have been completed, and the remainder are well on track.

Earlier this month, the Government announced \$20 million for the Australian Fire Danger Rating System and a \$2 million national education campaign for the Australian Warning System – both of which provide consistent information right across the country.²

No matter where you live in Australia, you will know that when you receive a 'watch and act' alert, you need to start taking action to protect you and your family. If it's

¹ <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/BridgetMcKenzie/Pages/national-pre-disaster-season-briefings-start.aspx>

² <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/mckenzie/2021/australian-government-continuing-act-recommendations-national-natural-disaster-royal-commission>

upgraded to an emergency warning, you're in danger and need to act immediately or put your life at risk.³

All these efforts in response to the Royal Commission, as well as other initiatives underway, place the country in a stronger position than we have ever been ahead of the next disaster season.

We need to be ready. The BOM has foreshadowed this coming disaster season – which officially starts in a few days' time on 1 November – could see a 'slightly above average' number of cyclones in the region and an increased risk of widespread and prolonged flooding in eastern and northern Australia. This is on top of the bushfires and severe thunderstorms that are typical this time of year.⁴ The news of the past week has shown us how wild the weather can be, with reports of hail the size of grapefruit in the NSW coastal town of Coffs Harbour,⁵ and of large hail and tornadoes across Queensland.⁶

The personal toll from a disaster cannot be measured and there is no magic formula to calculate how long it will take for a person, a community, a region or indeed the nation, to come back. Recovery takes time and is contingent on many locally unique variables including availability of trades and materials.

Deloitte Access Economics produced an updated report on the economic costs of natural disasters in Australia, which was released this month.⁷ The report estimates that natural disasters will cost Australia between \$73 billion and \$94 billion per year by 2060. This is a significant increase on the current estimate of \$38 billion per year.

Drawing on new data, Deloitte concludes that the brunt of the increases will be borne by the coastal areas of South-East Queensland (including Brisbane) and North-East NSW, which will become more exposed to tropical cyclones and floods. Melbourne is predicted to experience greater costs associated with flooding.

³ <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/australian-warning-system/>

⁴ Bureau of Meteorology Severe Weather Outlook 2021-22 <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/cyclones/australia/>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/oct/20/grapefruit-sized-australias-largest-hailstone-recorded-after-queensland-storms>

⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-18/qld-storms-weather-tornadoes-qld/100547112>

⁷ Special Report: Update to the economic costs of natural disasters in Australia. October 2021. <http://australianbusinessroundtable.com.au/our-research>

The report makes a compelling case for why we need to act **now** to minimise the impact of natural disasters in this country.

The Productivity Commission estimates that 97% of all disaster funding is spent on mopping up and just 3% is spent on getting ready.⁸

The NRRRA is driving efforts to flip this in several ways, including through the \$600 million Preparing Australia Program, announced by Prime Minister Scott Morrison in May. The program focuses on disaster risk reduction and preparing for future large-scale natural hazards.

We've consulted extensively with communities; state, territory and local governments; and the building and insurance sector to make sure the program is locally led. Data and analysis from the Australian Climate Service is informing where to target the program and what types of projects to support.

Very soon we will open the first of the program's three streams: Preparing Australian Communities (Local Communities Program). Under Round 1, competitive grants will be available for community projects that reduce the impact and ease the burden of recovery from bushfires, floods and tropical cyclones.

Disaster risk reduction is also the focus of existing programs, for which we are now responsible:

- The \$50 million National Flood Mitigation Infrastructure Program for 2020-21, which under Round 1 states and territories will receive funding for 22 projects valued between \$700,000 and almost \$13.4 million.
 - This includes \$9.4 million for a new levee at Katherine in the NT and \$3.5 million to refurbish and upgrade levees at Wangaratta in Victoria.
- In support of the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, the Australian, state and territory governments jointly committed \$261 million over five years from 2019-20 for the Disaster Risk Reduction Package.

⁸ <https://insurancecouncil.com.au/media-releases/ica-welcomes-federal-budget-disaster-mitigation-funding/>

- More than \$50 million of the Government's more than \$130 million contribution has been allocated, including payments to the states and territories to progress risk reduction priorities.
- The Agency will soon consult with the states and territories about how best to invest the next tranche of funding for national initiatives.

Risk reduction is also a key aspect of the longer-term support for communities that went through the 2019 North Queensland monsoon trough and the 2019/20 Black Summer Bushfires. As well as helping them with their ongoing recovery, we have worked with these communities on ways to minimise the physical, economic and emotional toll of the next disaster.

With our delivery partners, the Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority and the Queensland Reconstruction Authority, we are well progressed in rolling out a \$60 million suite of Australian Government grants in the North Queensland flood zone. Five grants programs have opened and in some cases, money is already flowing and work underway.

For example, Under Stream 1 of the Recovery and Resilience grants program, 58 projects worth \$11.5 million were announced in June.⁹ Local governments have been funded for works ranging from helipads, disaster recovery centres, weather stations, flood camera upgrades, flood mapping, improved emergency communications, and the employment of disaster management and community resilience officers.

Support continues for communities affected by the Black Summer Bushfires. Eighty-nine percent, or \$2.5 billion of the \$2.8 billion the Australian Government made available for these communities, has been delivered. This includes \$1.7 billion from the now \$2.1 billion National Bushfire Recovery Fund.

While the Australian Government's contribution is substantial, the real measure of success is in how this money makes a difference. Take, for example, the \$9.9 million

⁹ [https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/davidlittleproud/Pages/\\$12-million-in-flood-recovery-projects-for-north-queensland-15-06-2021.aspx](https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/davidlittleproud/Pages/$12-million-in-flood-recovery-projects-for-north-queensland-15-06-2021.aspx)

in Australian Government funding - matched by the state government - that's been provided to SA Water for a new seawater desalination plant and distribution network on Kangaroo Island¹⁰. Partially funded through the Local Economic Recovery (LER) program, the plant will produce as much as 80 percent of the Island's current water requirements, providing additional water security and improving bushfire resilience¹¹.

In relation to the key remaining component of the National Bushfire Recovery Fund, we've received almost twelve hundred applications for the \$280 million Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program, which closed earlier this month. Grants of between \$20,000 and \$10 million are available for projects in 110 local government areas disaster declared following the bushfires.

We aim to fund projects across **all** local government areas, based on projects received, demonstrated need and project merit. The total amount of grant funding awarded to any local government area may be higher or lower than the indicative amounts identified in the grant guidelines. Successful projects should be announced later this year.

Based on the feedback received from our Recovery Support Officers, we extended the application closing date for these grants. Understandably, people were finding it hard to get their applications together while also being in lockdown. I hope that giving people a bit more time to apply will make a world of difference for the communities the grants are intended to help.

We must never forget who we're here for and we must always make sure our work has a tangible, positive and lasting impact – that's what our guiding principle of 'locally-led, locally understood and locally implemented' is all about.

Our Recovery Support Officer network is vital in this regard. By the end of the year, despite the challenges posed by rolling lockdowns, we'll have around 60 Recovery Support Officers located throughout the country, all employed from their local communities. They connect people with support and services, and they feed information back on what's working, what isn't, and what more could be done.

¹⁰ <https://recovery.gov.au/our-community/local-area-profiles>

¹¹ <https://watertalks.sawater.com.au/kangaroo-island-desalination-20>

What our Recovery Support Officers tell us about what's really happening 'on the ground' is gold. I've already spoken about the feedback that led to a revised closing date for the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants. There's also the escalation of border issues impacting health service delivery in Mungindi, NSW, through the National Coordination Mechanism. This sort of information improves government policy and services, which in turn improves the lives of Australians.

I continue visiting communities throughout the country, although state-determined travel restrictions and lockdowns have meant I've spent much less time on the road than I would like. With borders opening, I look forward to spending more time talking to people about their recovery needs, and ways we can help them be better prepared.

In July I travelled through the North and South Burnett regions of Queensland to understand how landowners have used drought support to 'future proof' their businesses, and to talk to councils about bushfire and flood recovery and flood mitigation.

In September I travelled through South-East Queensland to see how communities are recovering from the Black Summer Bushfires. I spoke to local disaster management coordinators, volunteer firefighters, economic recovery officers, primary producers and tourism operators. I also looked at projects funded through the LER program - part of the Australian and Queensland Government's bushfire support.

With funding from the Australian and Queensland Governments, including almost \$1.9 million in LER funding, Noosa Council established 'Firetech Connect', a 'living laboratory' through which 85 companies from all over the world share information on disaster preparedness technologies like drones and ultra early detection. They plan to expand so that organisations can test the viability of their technology in simulated environments. This is a major step up from a situation room or disaster dashboard.

The focus on helping our nation be better prepared for future natural disasters is but one aspect of NRRA's remit.

We are also responsible for the joint Commonwealth-State/Territory Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment, and the Disaster Recovery Allowance.

In response to a Royal Commission recommendation (22.5), we're working with States and Territories to develop nationally-consistent 'off the shelf' recovery packages. Recent experience developing significant Category C/D packages - including enhanced clean-up and restoration assistance, industry recovery support and a \$200 million Infrastructure Betterment Fund in NSW - is informing this work.

During the 2020-21 financial year, the DRFA was activated in response to 45 natural disaster events – the Agency continues to monitor all of these. Since 1 July, the DRFA has been activated in response to five events, providing assistance to 17 local government areas. Of recent note is the tornado that ripped through the Armidale region in NSW on 14 October.¹²

As the Australian Government's 'all-hazards' agency we have been very busy developing and refining policy for the COVID-19 Disaster Payments and Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment. Both these payments are administered by Services Australia.

To 24 October, over 2.1 million people who've lost income because of lockdowns have received the COVID-19 Disaster Payment and over \$12 billion has been paid out.

On top of this, 179,332 people on income support have been granted the payment, with over \$258.6 million paid out. As states and territories achieve their 80 percent full vaccination targets and begin to re-open – meaning people can return to work - there will be less need for the payment.

Critical to the Agency successfully delivering on its remit is its governance, oversight and integrity arrangements.

We have an Advisory Board and an audit and risk committee and engage with state and territory stakeholders through the National Emergency Management Ministers' Meeting, the Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee and its two sub-committees - the Mitigation and Risk Sub-committee and the Community Outcomes and Recovery Sub-committee.

¹² <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/mckenzie/2021/disaster-assistance-armidale-nsw-after-tornado>

There is plenty more I could tell you about our work, but I'm sure you are eager to move onto questions. I'd like to finish by recognising the efforts of the Agency staff, who have established this national capability with a sense of urgency, while also taking care not to rush to failure.

We have delivered on our immediate obligations to support communities impacted by disasters and the pandemic, and developed new programs which will help minimise the cost and heartache of future natural disasters.

This is a significant achievement for a new Agency with a remit that touches the lives of every Australian. It also busts the myth that the Australian Public Service is unwieldy, cumbersome and slow and I am extremely proud of my team.