

Opening Statement

- Thank you Chair, Committee Members for the opportunity to make a brief opening statement, and for your ongoing interest in our work.

- On behalf of all members of the NBRA, let me pay my respects to:
 - the families and friends of the 33 people who tragically lost their lives in the 2019-20 bushfire season; and

 - the thousands of people who lost homes, property, livestock and possessions, or who have suffered from the residual effects of smoke, or simply the grief and trauma that comes with such a large fire event.

- We are keenly aware that:
 - the first anniversaries of tragic loss are upon bushfire-affected communities at the moment, and

 - anxieties are rising as the 2020-21 bushfire season progresses.
 - For those struggling, help is available.

- The health and wellbeing of these communities continues to be one of our greatest concerns. One of the most damaging impacts of last year's summer of fires is seen by so few, but is debilitating for so many. Help is available.
- But equally, I and the NBRA team continue to be inspired by the willingness of ordinary Australians who have gone through so much, to step forward and talk to us about their health and wellbeing concerns.
 - The fact we can talk about it, means we can identify it and address it. From what I observe, the Australian community has come a long way in terms of recognising and speaking up about mental health in particular.
- Chair, recovery is happening. It happens at different paces and in different ways – but it is happening.
 - When the NBRA was established, the government announced an initial allocation of \$2bn for us to do our work.
 - This was in addition to the support – both in funding and on the ground support – that the Commonwealth was already committed to.

- To 31 August, \$1.2bn has been spent from the National Bushfire Recovery Fund.
- I know that the Government has allocated more than the initial \$2bn, and I expect that these figures will continue to rise.
- When combined with other Commonwealth funding through Disaster Recovery Payments, Allowances and DRFA commitments, around \$1.8bn from the Commonwealth is already on the ground working to support the communities.
- But I do have a note of caution. Recovery takes time. We are just over 12 months from the beginning of the fires, and only 8 months past the end. The journey is a very long one.
- As the NBRA, led by the communities, is pivoting from relief to recovery, we have held true to the principles I outlined when we began this journey:
 - We are locally informed – we listen and adapt, and listen again
 - We are focussed on the ease of access to support

- We have in the front of our mind the long-term benefit for communities, and
- we are working closely with our stakeholders and partners;
- As part of this pivot to longer term recovery there is a lot of effort at the moment on Local Economic Recovery. But while economic recovery is crucial – we should not see recovery as narrowly defined:
 - We are focussed across all lines of recovery.
 - Economic, Social, Environmental and Infrastructure.
 - The Commonwealth government has made significant investments across these lines of recovery and we continue to monitor their implementation closely. Our partnerships with State and local government is crucial to this success.
 - We cannot lose sight of the reality that recovery is so much more than the immediate relief efforts that have dominated the conversation to date. It is about what

will make the community stronger, more resilient and benefit them over a much longer period.

- There is ample academic evidence to tell us this, but it has been our own observation that reinforces that we must take a long term view. Individuals and communities travel very different paths to recovery – there is no one size fits all. But a common refrain we hear is to ask that we make sure that support is available long after general interest may have subsided.
- This is why we have taken time to listen, adapt and then listen again. In the NBRA we have an individual or community centric approach to our work. We listen to what is working and what isn't. If we can shape and influence change then we will.
- It is important to us that our efforts are not just about the formal Commonwealth role. Where we can help victims through measures available across other government programs, through non-government partners, through philanthropic efforts, through local community connections – then that is what we will do. One of our largest efforts has been as the collaborator and the connector of efforts in support of individuals and communities.

- So while we can all agree that 2020 has been a difficult year, and that COVID19 has rightly consumed a lot of our attention, I trust that this is an opportunity to remind everyone of the devastating bushfires that impacted so many last summer.

Thank you.