



Australian Government
Department of Home Affairs

Black Summer 2019-20: Lessons to be learned

May 2020

Introduction

The Department of Home Affairs (the Department) has documented initial observations and insights in relation to the portfolio's preparation and planning for, response to, and ongoing recovery from, the 2019-20 'Black Summer' bushfires. In conjunction with the outcomes of other reviews and inquiries, the Department's initial observations and insights will, when analysed in detail, provide clear actions, which when put into practice, will become lessons 'learned'. These initial observations and insights are lessons-to-be-learned.

The report is in three parts: an overview; a non-exhaustive summary of the portfolio's role and emergency management including actions taken over the 2019-20 summer; and a catalogue of observations and insights. The report is based on observations and insights from the 2019-20 bushfires, known as the 'Black Summer' bushfires, but the lessons-to-be-learned can be applied to all natural hazards, and where appropriate, other sources of threat and risk.

1. Overview

Australia's current natural disaster management arrangements have served governments, and through them, Australian communities, well, for decades. The response to the Black Summer bushfires across all impacted jurisdictions was extraordinary. However, the Black Summer fires presented never-before-seen scale and reach, concurrently impacting communities in multiple jurisdictions, with significant costs to life and property, and substantial, long-term disruption to local and regional economies. While current arrangements are effective, there is an opportunity to do more to further strengthen Commonwealth, and by extension national, emergency management governance, capability and capacity. This is a key lesson from Black Summer bushfires.

The intense, long fire season and concurrency of multiple severe fires in several locations across the country stretched the nation's capacity to cope. The overlapping northern and southern fire seasons in Western Australia, an early start to fires in Eastern Australia, the intense, large fires experienced in New South Wales and Victoria, and severe fires throughout the remainder of the states and territories, placed pressure on fire and emergency services capacity, and coordination of finite resources. Nationally, 33 people lost their lives, and over 3,000 homes were destroyed. Close to 13 million hectares were burnt. The Department's view is that the Black Summer bushfires graphically demonstrated the benefit of the Commonwealth being proactively involved and taking a leadership role to deliver coordinated response and recovery measures.

In current, formal arrangements, coordination of governments' responses to emergencies relies on the cooperation of all parties. Apart from some specific legislative provisions such as activating disaster recovery payments under the *Social Security Act 1991* (Cth) (Social Security Act), most Commonwealth roles (whether internal or external to the Commonwealth) is by non-legislated agreement. During the Black Summer bushfires, the Commonwealth proactively deployed the Australian Defence Force (ADF), and for the first time, compulsorily called out reservists to assist with that effort. The Commonwealth also established the National Bushfire Recovery Agency (NBRA) to lead and coordinate a national response to rebuilding communities affected by bushfires. These Commonwealth actions enhanced, and complemented, the effectiveness of state government response and recovery efforts.

Climate change can increase disaster risk in a variety of ways, including by altering the frequency and intensity of natural hazards, affecting vulnerability to natural hazards, and changing exposure patterns. Reducing disaster risk is essential to increasing our resilience into the future. The frequency and intensity of natural hazards are forecast to increase both in Australia and globally. Future bushfire seasons will commence earlier, be longer, and have severe impacts on Australian communities.

The Department's observation is that the Australian public expects national leadership and a unified response in addressing national disasters. The Department considers that strengthened Commonwealth emergency management capabilities and arrangements, which complement and work together with state

and territory legal frameworks, would entrench Commonwealth support to the Australian community to prepare for, respond to, and recover from future bushfires. Such action support changes to the Commonwealth's emergency management response described above, and should be informed by outcomes from the current Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) report on practical measures to improve Australia's climate and disaster resilience, and outcomes from other related Parliamentary inquiries.

2. Portfolio role and emergency management

2.1 Portfolio

The Department brings together Australia's federal law enforcement, national and transport security, criminal justice, emergency management, multicultural affairs, settlement services and immigration and border-related functions, working together to keep Australia safe, secure, prosperous and united.

2.2 Emergency Management Australia

Emergency Management Australia (EMA) is a Division of the Department. It is Australia's national government disaster management organisation and has a relatively small staff of approximately 100 and its responsibilities span disaster risk reduction, critical incident planning, disaster preparedness, crisis and security management, and disaster recovery.

State and territory governments have responsibility for coordinating and planning the response to, and recovery from, disasters within their jurisdictions. Through EMA, the Commonwealth coordinates, collaborates with, and assists the states and territories to improve the overall resilience of Australia, Australians and the things that Australians value.

Preparing for the season

EMA led a series of severe weather season preparedness sessions in partnership with the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) and the ADF. These sessions provided an outlook of climate, weather and fire risk. EMA presented observations and insights into last season and ADF presented on requesting assistance. They also provided an opportunity for the state or territory to describe the emerging risks and preparedness relevant to their jurisdictions. Two sessions were presented to Australian Government departments and a specific session was held for private sector industries such as power, transport and telecommunications sectors.

In preparation for the season, EMA established a weekly industry engagement forum in partnership with the Critical Infrastructure Security Division (CISD) of the Department. This provided Trusted Information Sharing Network (TISN) members and other industry representatives across all critical infrastructure sectors to participate in the EMA all-hazards briefing, which included BoM weekly weather forecasts, followed by industry and government information sharing on bushfire impacts including issues around logistics, and road and telecommunications access and facilitated the resolution of emerging issues in industry supporting the response or providing critical services.

Australian Government Crisis Coordination Centre

A key business unit of EMA is the Australian Government Crisis Coordination Centre (CCC). The CCC coordinated the Commonwealth's response to the 2019-20 bushfires, in line with the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework. Between 1 July 2019 and 16 March 2020 the CCC:

- coordinated 76 requests for assistance from states and territories;
- issued more than 1,100 incident notifications and updates, and 115 detailed Incident Briefs to provide situational awareness to key stakeholders;
- deployed 25 individuals, for a total of 149 days, to State Emergency Operations Centres in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia;
- activated and maintained a Crisis Coordination Team for 82 days, including liaison officers and surge staff from across the Commonwealth;

- activated the Australian Government Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN) for six states and coordinated international offers of assistance;
- facilitated 29 senior level meetings of national coordinators through the Australian Government Crisis Committee (AGCC), National Crisis Committee (NCC), and the Commissioners and Chief Officers Strategic Committee (CCOSC) of the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC);
- worked with state and territories and supported the NRSC to ensure that emergency service capabilities could be shared across the country based on need; and
- coordinated 155 offers international offers of assistance from 70 countries.

Concurrent to these efforts, EMA was the operational lead in the Commonwealth's non-health response to COVID-19.

2.3 Stakeholder relationships

The Department works in partnership with Commonwealth departments, state and territory governments, the private sector, civil society, academia, governments of other countries, and multilateral organisations in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from natural disasters, including bushfires. The Department also works in close partnership with Australia's science agencies, the BoM, Geoscience Australia and the CSIRO.

The Department, as the Commonwealth representative, provides strategic leadership on national priorities in disaster resilience policy, and supporting national capability and capacity development initiatives, through the Australia–New Zealand Emergency Management Committee (ANZEMC).

At the Commonwealth level, the Department is instrumental in progressing climate and disaster resilience and adaptation policies and initiatives as a co-chair of the Australian Government Disaster and Climate Resilience Reference Group (RRG). The RRG is co-chaired at Deputy Secretary level with the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. The RRG comprises senior executives from Commonwealth departments and science agencies.

The Department, through EMA, funds and oversees the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR), the main role of which is to enhance the long-term disaster resilience of Australian communities through innovative thought leadership, professional development and research utilisation services on behalf of government.

Through various funding programs, the Commonwealth provides financial assistance to state and territory governments, individuals and organisations in preparing for, and recovering from, bushfires. These arrangements are discussed further below.

2.4 National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework

In April 2019, the Commonwealth Government released the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (Framework) to guide national action to address existing disaster risks and minimise new risks. The Framework sets the five-year foundation from 2019-2023 to address systemic disaster risk in all sectors of Australia's economy against four priority outcomes:

- understand disaster risk;
- accountable decisions;
- enhanced investment; and
- governance, ownership and responsibility.

The Framework was co-designed by all levels of government, the private sector and the Australian community. The Framework was endorsed by the Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management (MCPEM) in June 2019 and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in March 2020. On 26 February 2020, the Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management made a statement to the Australian Parliament on disaster risk reduction which outlined the long-term work underway across the nation to reduce the potential for harm and enable a prosperous and resilient future.

The 2019-20 bushfire recovery demonstrates that there are a broad range of stakeholders dealing with disaster impacts. Building resilience to future bushfires and national disasters is an economy wide issue. Stakeholders all have a role in reducing disaster risk before a disaster occurs.

In March 2020, COAG also agreed to a new National Partnership Agreement on Disaster Risk Reduction (NPA). The new NPA will support the Framework and provide \$104.4 million for states and territories to deliver state and local risk reduction initiatives over five years. This is in addition to \$26.1 million that the Commonwealth will be investing in nationally significant projects.

At its March meeting, COAG tasked MCPEM to expedite preparing a national action plan to implement the Framework, in consultation with relevant COAG councils, to COAG leaders by June / July 2020. The Department is working with Commonwealth agencies, states and territories, and some industry and community stakeholders. This will be the first action plan, with updates to the plan required annually.

Within the Commonwealth, the Department is implementing the Framework through tRRG.

The Department has also:

- published Guidance for Strategic Decisions on Climate and Disaster Risk to help key decision makers understand and act to reduce risk; and
- partnered with the CSIRO and AIDR to deliver a series of '*Understanding Disaster Risk*' national forums in October 2019.

The Department is establishing a new national climate and disaster intelligence capability to ensure people have access to the best information and guidance needed to make risk-informed decisions to improve our future resilience. A pilot project is underway in the freight sector to demonstrate the benefits and feasibility of the new national capability.

The Framework and its national action plan, and the NPA are critical in enabling Australia to reduce the risk of future bushfire seasons.

2.5 Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework (ADPF) for Severe to Catastrophic Disasters

In 2018, the Department in consultation with Commonwealth departments, and state and territory governments, developed the ADPF, to support the development of capabilities required to effectively prepare for and manage severe to catastrophic events. In February 2019 and June 2019, the ADPF was endorsed by ANZEMC and MCPEM respectively. The ADPF is a critical framework which assisted Australia respond to the 2019-20 bushfires.

2.6 Disaster Recovery Funding

The Department, through EMA, manages a number of Commonwealth funding programs that have been accessed and expanded on to help Australians recover from the 2019-20 bushfire season.

Commonwealth recovery payments to individuals

The Commonwealth provides financial assistance directly to individuals affected by major disasters through the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP) and the Disaster Recovery Allowance

(DRA). Both payments have a legislative basis in the Social Security Act. Services Australia administers these payments.

Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment

The AGDRP is provided to those who have been severely affected by major disasters, including where:

- the person is seriously injured;
- the person is an immediate family member of an Australian who is killed; or
- the person's principal place of residence has been destroyed or has sustained major damage.

In recognition of the significant impacts the 2019-20 bushfires had on affected communities, the Commonwealth broadened the eligibility for AGDRP to cover major asset loss at a person's principal place of residence (greater than \$20,000 in value). This covered assets such as sheds, machinery, fencing and motor vehicles. In addition, AGDRP recipients received an additional one-off payment of \$400 per child to further help with their recovery needs.

In response to the 2019-20 bushfires, AGDRP payments have been made to individuals in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, and Tasmania.

Disaster Recovery Allowance

The Disaster Recovery Allowance (DRA) came into effect on 1 October 2013 and replaced the former ex gratia Disaster Income Recovery Subsidy. The DRA provides short-term income support (for up to 13 weeks) to people with a demonstrated loss of income as a direct result of a major disaster.

The Commonwealth Minister responsible for emergency management can activate the DRA for events of national significance where assistance in the form of income support is required. In doing so, consideration is given to the extent to which the nature of the event or scope of the event is unusual, and the extent of disruption to the workforce.

The DRA recipients may work when possible throughout the 13-week period. The payment rate for recipients is the difference between an individual's actual post-disaster earnings and their projected earnings based on pre-disaster income.

A person can be eligible for the DRA, if they:

- are over 16 years old;
- are not receiving another income support payment; and
- have suffered a loss of income as a direct result of the disaster.

The DRA is taxable and subject to beneficiary tax offsets, consistent with other social security payments.

In recognition of the significant impacts of the 2019-20 bushfires on affected individuals, the Commonwealth enhanced the DRA's administration, by:

- increasing the income cut-off threshold to enable more Australians to qualify;
- simplifying the way DRA is calculated;
- streamlining the application process to enable quicker processing; and
- making DRA non-assessable, non-exempt income – that is tax free.

In response to the 2019-20 bushfires, DRA payments have been made to individuals in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory.

Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018

In recognition of the significant cost of natural disasters, the Commonwealth Government established the joint Commonwealth-state cost sharing arrangements to alleviate the financial burden on states, and to

facilitate the early provision of assistance to disaster affected communities. Through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018 (DRFA), the Commonwealth Government reimburses state governments for a proportion of their eligible expenditure on relief and recovery, including expenditure by their local governments. These arrangements are intended to act as a safety net against large, unexpected fiscal impacts from natural disasters.

The DRFA makes provisions for state governments to activate relief and recovery assistance immediately following a disaster without seeking approval from the Australian Government. Under these arrangements, the states determine the type and level of assistance to make available. This recognises that states are best placed to identify the type and level of assistance to make available, in accordance with their responsibility for disaster management. This also means that arrangements can be inconsistent across the states and territories, and for national scale disasters, communities in different jurisdictions are afforded different types and levels of recovery assistance.

Assistance measures

There are four categories of assistance measures under the DRFA:

- **Category A:** assistance to individuals to alleviate personal hardship or distress arising as a direct result of a disaster.
- **Category B:** assistance to the state, and/or local governments for the restoration of essential public assets and certain counter-disaster operations.
- **Category C:** assistance for severely affected communities, regions or sectors and includes clean-up and recovery grants for small businesses and primary producers and/or the establishment of a Community Recovery Fund. Category C assistance is only made available when the impact of a disaster is severe. It is intended to be in addition to assistance under Categories A and B. Category C assistance requires agreement from the Prime Minister.
- **Category D:** exceptional circumstances assistance beyond Categories A, B and C. Category D assistance is generally considered once the impact of the disaster has been assessed and specific recovery gaps identified. Category D assistance requires agreement from the Prime Minister.

The level of financial support available is demand driven and not capped. Key DRFA elements include:

- thresholds for assistance: the Commonwealth provides assistance only if cumulative state expenditure (on events meeting the small disaster criterion of \$240 000) exceeds a certain threshold in a financial year;
- cost-sharing rates: the level of reimbursement depends on the level of state expenditure and the type of activity; and
- eligible expenditure: reimbursement is only available for defined activities, falling under three categories (with a fourth category available for discretionary assistance requiring agreement from the Prime Minister).

The NBRA is leading and coordinating the national response to rebuilding communities affected by the bushfires. The Department, which is responsible for administering the DRFA, is working closely with the NBRA.

Volunteer Firefighter payments

On 29 December 2019, the Commonwealth Government announced that volunteer firefighters would receive financial support for loss of income while fighting the fires. These payments are capped at \$300 per day, with a total of up to \$6,000 per person. New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory are participating in the program.

Emergency Response Fund

The *Emergency Response Fund Act* commenced on 12 December 2019. The Emergency Response Fund (ERF) is a dedicated Commonwealth Government investment fund credited with approximately \$4 billion on establishment providing:

- \$150 million each financial year to fund emergency response and recovery following natural disasters in Australia that have a significant or catastrophic impact, when the Commonwealth Government determines that existing recovery programs are insufficient to meet the scale of the response required; and
- up to \$50 million each financial year to build resilience to, and prepare for or reduce the risk of future natural disasters, when the Commonwealth Government determines that funding over and above its existing suite of arrangements is required.

The ERF may include additional recovery grants, economic aid, and support for affected communities and industry to help build their resilience to future disasters, as well as pre-disaster preparedness initiatives.

At the time this report was compiled, and given the scale of dedicated recovery funding through the NBRA, the Director General EMA has recommended that the ERF not be accessed.

2.7 Social cohesion and community resilience

Australia is a cohesive society, with a successful record of integrating people from all around the world. Australia's liberal democratic political values and inclusive national identity have laid the foundation for a resilient national community and have fostered civic participation. Social cohesion concerns all Australians and has touchpoints across many dimensions of our life: from economic opportunity, to a strong sense of social capital, particularly in the sense of community faced with the unprecedented bushfires, to the confidence in the effectiveness of governments to support the Australian community in responding to the bushfires.

Socially cohesive communities are resilient communities because they are ready to look after each other in times of crisis - where survival and resilience are tested. The 2019-20 bushfires are an example of this community resilience being tested, and the whole Australian community – from citizens through to new migrants – united in their response. The Commonwealth's \$71 million package of social cohesion initiatives, announced in March 2019, to create a stronger, more cohesive Australia provides funding for community initiatives that will encourage and promote community cohesion and resilience.

2.8 Trusted Information Sharing Network

The TISN is the Commonwealth's primary national engagement mechanism for business-government information sharing and resilience-building initiatives relating to critical infrastructure. Housed within the CISD in the Department, the TISN provides a secure environment for critical infrastructure owners and operators to regularly share information and cooperate within and across sectors to address challenges to critical infrastructure resilience. TISN members include critical infrastructure owners and operators, representatives from Australian, state and territory government and peak national bodies.

During the 2019-20 summer, sector groups within the TISN supported Commonwealth and state and territory government activities. This primarily involved coordinating situational awareness and cross-sector information sharing, informing response and recovery activities. For example:

- the Food and Grocery Sector Group (FGSG) organised five teleconferences to share information on the fires and coordinate response activities. This enabled information sharing, including reopening of priority locations and coordination of activities with Foodbank on logistics, donations and messaging;

- the Banking and Finance Sector Group (BFSG) held a teleconference and regularly shared information via email to ensure situational awareness on service coverage, issues of cash handling in fire effected areas and coordination of ATM serviceability; and
- the Water Services Sector Group (WSSG) held two teleconferences where members shared information about ongoing response and recovery, and mutual aid agreements.
- the CISD has agreed to part fund the development of a national good practice operational guideline on recovery of bushfire affected water catchments with WSSG / the Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA) . This will provide guidance on managing to bushfire risks to drinking water quality, through a review of existing practical guidance from water utilities. The project will consider the immediate operational challenges of treating and delivering water after bushfire, and the longer-term strategies to increase resilience of water supply system to bushfires.

2.9 Working Holiday Maker Visa changes

During the 2019-20 bushfire season, visa arrangements worked well to enable overseas firefighters to travel to and work alongside Australian firefighters at short notice. Flexibility within the Working Holiday Maker visa allowed changes to be made to encourage working holiday makers to help with recovery efforts.

2.10 Emergency management tools in development

Australian Fire Danger Rating System

The Commonwealth is partnering with state and territory governments to develop and implement a new Australian Fire Danger Rating System (AFDRS), improving the quality and accessibility of hazard specific information to the community. The AFDRS will deliver increased accuracy of localised fire risks, including through implementing improved fire behaviour models. The AFDRS would communicate more accurate bushfire risk information to fire and emergency services and the community, through revised fire danger ratings.

Public Safety Mobile Broadband and Emergency Alert

The Commonwealth continues to assist state and territory governments to develop and deliver public safety communications systems, primarily Public Safety Mobile Broadband (PSMB) and Emergency Alert (EA).

Public safety agencies currently rely on radio networks for voice communications and some low-speed data services. While these systems are very reliable, they have limited access to contemporary situational awareness and evolving public safety capabilities as they do not support web-based applications and heavy data traffic. On 12 December 2018, COAG agreed a Strategic Roadmap that sets out a plan to design, implement and operate PSMB in Australia. The Department, through EMA, continues to work with jurisdictions in developing a PSMB.

The EA is a key public safety communication capability, which was established following the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires in Victoria. The EA is the national telephone warning system used by emergency services to send voice messages to landlines and text messages to mobile phones within a defined area about likely or actual emergencies. EA is only one mechanism to warn communities of an emergency. Other reliable sources used by public safety agencies include local radio, television, and state and territory emergency service websites or apps.

Strategic review into new and emerging telephony-based warnings technologies

In December 2018, the Prime Minister announced \$750,000 for a strategic review into new and emerging telephony-based warnings technologies. The review will examine and trial technology opportunities that could future-proof, to the greatest extent possible, Australia's crisis communications and warnings

capabilities. This review is to consider foreign government systems and forms of community emergency alerting technologies, as well as applications for use in Australia, in the context of:

- community expectations
- needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and people with disability
- legal obligations of those responsible for issuing warnings, and
- system reliance and resilience.

The last review was undertaken in 2014, in conjunction with the National Review of Warnings and Information.

National climate and disaster risk intelligence capability

The Department is undertaking a pilot project to explore the benefits of a national climate and disaster risk intelligence capability for Australia, focusing on:

- better coordinating existing capabilities to forecast, assess and manage climate and disaster risk;
- exploring open access to credible climate and disaster risk information; and
- promoting collaboration and communication networks between partners and users of climate and disaster information.

This project will be completed by June 2020 and outcomes will inform the design of a future climate and disaster risk intelligence capability.

Mental health of emergency services workers

A key observation from the 2019-20 bushfires and from previous natural disasters is that support is needed to address mental health issues for Australia's emergency services workers, including volunteers and former/retired workers.

The Senate Education and Employment References Committee report *The people behind 000: mental health of our first responders* made the recommendation that a Commonwealth-led process involving federal, state and territory governments be initiated to design and implement a national action plan on first responder mental health (Recommendation 4).

The Commonwealth has allocated \$4.5 million for a national action plan to reduce the rates of suicide and mental illness among emergency services workers. The Department is leading this work, in consultation with stakeholders from across all levels of government, civil society, and emergency workers and their families. The action plan will be undertaken concurrently with other initiatives to better understand and improve mental health outcomes for first responders and emergency services workers.

The Commonwealth Government also announced \$10 million for provision of support services for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other mental illness by specialist organisations to emergency services workers who responded to the 2019-20 bushfires, and their immediate families.

The Commonwealth has also provided \$1.5 million to establish a pilot program for a social support and mental health literacy network for emergency services workers and their families/kinship groups. This network will also connect those in need of clinical services in relation to PTSD and other mental health issues, including suicidality.

3. Initial observations and insights

3.1 Surge staff were ready and available when needed

The CCC was able to surge, taking in already trained staff from other areas of EMA, elsewhere in the Department, the ADF, other parts of the Australian Public Service, and New Zealand counterparts to contribute to the Government response to the Black Summer fires. This worked very well. The significant outputs of the CCC detailed in 2.2 above, validate this observation. Continuing this general approach, the CCC is currently training additional staff in preparation for similar surge requirements for the upcoming 2020-21 season.

3.2 Core crisis management architecture works well

The Australian Government and its departments manage preparedness, response and recovery to all crises, including natural disasters, according to the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework (AGCMF). It is the overarching policy for coordinated, whole-of-government crisis management. The core elements of the architecture in the AGCMF worked effectively during Black Summer, and communication and coordination between the states, territories, and the Commonwealth generally operated well – however, see also 3.4 below.

3.3 Preparedness briefings brought stakeholders together

EMA's program of preparedness briefings, which brought together senior officials across governments to discuss national preparedness and strengthen ongoing communication and information sharing were successful. The briefs were provided from the beginning of September through to November, to all states and territories, Australian Government agencies, Government and Opposition Members of Parliament, and industry. Preparation for similar arrangements in 2020-21 is already underway. These include the annual preparedness briefing program similar to that held last year, and will develop further as outcomes and recommendations are announced from the various reviews of the Black Summer are announced.

3.4 The Commonwealth's emergency management approach and enabling arrangements are only defined in policy

Apart from some specific legislative provisions such as activating disaster recovery payments under the Social Security Act, the Commonwealth's involvement in natural disasters is largely reliant on its relationships and engagement, principally with the states and territories. There is no specific, consolidated legislation for emergency management at the Commonwealth level. This has historically meant that while the Commonwealth has had a role in shaping emergency management policy, its response to unfolding disasters has been 'waiting to be asked'. Before the Black Summer bushfires, the Department was considering the need to reform this long-standing approach, including considering proposing a legislative footing to entrench specific Commonwealth emergency management functions. The Department considers that 2019-20 bushfires graphically demonstrated the benefit of the Commonwealth being proactively involved, integrating both coordinated Commonwealth and national response and recovery measures. The Department observed that the community expects the Commonwealth Government to be proactive in disasters of national significance.

The Department considers that to avoid the potential for competing or confusing points of control, and to ensure rapidity in delivering response and recovery measures to impacted communities, resource and

capability coordination should be formally – preferably with a clear legislative footing – centred within government, with the attendant accountability that entails.

EMA administers, activates and operationalises the Australian Government Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN). The authority for this plan is drawn from the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework, which is the authorising policy for national crisis management. Through this plan EMA coordinates request for Australian Government non-financial assistance included the ADF support. Observations by the Department identified that the Australian Government working closely with the ADF can provide an enhanced coordination and strategic planning capability with and across States and Territories for disasters of national significance. This approach will improve the use, application and prioritisation of civil, military, governments and private sector capabilities in preparing, responding and recovering from nationally significant disasters.

The Department's observation is that 2019-20 bushfires and COVID-19 support the proposition that Commonwealth agencies should be formally empowered to take a much more active role in providing a coordinated national response to disasters. Such powers could enable the declaration of a national disaster, and the convening and direction of Commonwealth assets and personnel, including for provision to the states and territories to reinforce or complement response and recovery measures. Any such powers would complement existing powers within states and territories. The Department further observes that any such powers should be premised, fundamentally, on reducing disaster risk.

3.5 National emergency management capability development is hampered by varying capacities to invest

National emergency management capability efforts are hampered by differing levels of funding available to jurisdictions to invest in new, nationally applicable capabilities. A number of initiatives in development require partnerships between all jurisdictions, and in some cases, with non-government organisations. While generally these are productive working relationships, inconsistent or inadequate funding arrangements between the state and territory governments impact on decisions about, and timeframes for, development and implementation.

3.6 The Trusted Information Sharing Network provides a springboard for further engagement with owners and operators of critical infrastructure

The CISC, as part of its ongoing reflections on the response to the bushfires, is considering the role the Commonwealth should be playing in relation to critical infrastructure resilience. This includes assessing the appropriateness of the existing Critical Infrastructure Resilience Strategy, engagement with owners and operators through the Trusted Information Sharing Network (TISN) and how best to connect critical infrastructure owners and operators to response agencies during a crisis.

3.7 National disaster recovery resource sharing could be strengthened

In addition to the capabilities and work being done to support natural disaster mitigation, disaster planning and responsiveness, there exists a mechanism for sharing community recovery resources across jurisdictions through the Social Recovery Reference Group's *Guidelines for Interjurisdictional Assistance (Community Recovery)* (the Guidelines). The Guidelines provide Australian state and territory agencies with a formalised process for providing workforce assistance to other states or territories when their capability and/or capacity threshold in community recovery has or will be exceeded during a significant event. The aim of the Guidelines is to enable timely, targeted and effective deployment of community recovery support workers.

The Department sees there is room to enhance the national approach and sharing of post-disaster recovery arrangements, in particular mechanisms available within specific jurisdictions for psycho-social recovery. This could include for example, social workers, counsellors and charity coordination functions. The Department observes that the development of structured systems supporting recovery resource sharing would be a strategic investment as disaster recovery efforts do not always yield immediate results and recovery processes can go on for many years.

3.8 Nationally consistent and authoritative hazard information could be improved

Data supporting forecasts of bushfire hazard together with the actual extent of bushfires is required across the whole disaster lifecycle, for prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, as well as for improving disaster resilience efforts and climate adaptation. However, accessing and integrating the data into national products is challenging. Bushfire extent data is produced by each state and territory using different data structures and is presented in real time through different jurisdictional systems using a variety of formats and symbolisation. This variability creates integration challenges.

The Department observes that the development of a National Bushfire Intelligence Capability (NBIC) would greatly assist in this regard. In March 2020, COAG tasked the Australian Data and Digital Council in consultation with MCPEM, to improve national natural hazard intelligence, streamlining systems to support data sharing and enabling new information products. COAG leaders agreed that building resilience to natural disasters requires coordinated action from all governments, together with the private sector and communities. An NBIC would support this decision, and would provide nationally consistent and authoritative information for bushfire hazard and risk information across the disaster lifecycle, and for resilience and climate adaptation decision making. An NBIC would leverage the data produced to-date through such measures as the AFDRS and aims to provide an agreed framework for the coordination and use of national bushfire hazard data and risk information. Development of a NBIC would also support a national climate and disaster risk information capability.

3.9 National disaster risk reduction is multi-sectoral and not solely an emergency management task

The National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework highlights that disaster risk reduction needs to take place across all sectors of the economy and all levels of government. Disaster risk is often viewed as an emergency management issue, with an emphasis on preparing, responding and recovering from disruptions and disasters. The uneven distribution of natural resources and hazardous places, variability in people's access to forms of protection, rapid population growth and change, rapid urbanisation, decline of biodiversity, decline of soil productivity, fluctuation in the global economic market, dependence on highly interconnected socio-economic environmental and technological systems that support human needs and livelihoods are all factors that shape the extent to which we experience loss in a disaster and our ability to recover.

There is also more work to be done to better integrate measures that build resilience of specific social groups who experience disaster differently including but not limited to people living with disability, migrants and refugees, and women. Challenges to physical mobility and mental health can be exacerbated by acute natural hazards such as bushfire, domestic violence tends to increase in the aftermath of disaster, and those in the community who do not have full rights to social welfare can fall into poverty. These are social vulnerabilities that can be addressed prior to disaster in order to build our resilience to it.

The roles and responsibilities for reducing these systemic cause and effects of climate and disaster risks are not well understood, and there may not be incentive for responsible sectors to take action to reduce the risks in their control. Preliminary steps are being taken through the development of the National Action Plan and COAG endorsement of the Framework, however more needs to be done to make this a whole-of-society

priority. One key challenge to reducing disaster risk is advocating across sectors, not relying solely on emergency management agencies.

3.10 With climate change, disaster risk is growing

The Department observes that the changing climate is increasing disaster risk in a number of ways including by altering the frequency and intensity of natural hazards, affecting vulnerability, and changing exposure patterns. The Department considers that the RRG's refocussed role in leading the development of a whole-of-government approach to disaster and climate resilience is very positive, and its new forward work plan can be shaped to embed climate adaptation and disaster resilience across government policies, and more comprehensively reduce disaster risk.

3.11 Communications technology is critical for effective emergency response and recovery

The Department is focused on assisting with the delivery of nationally significant emergency management communications technologies. During the 2019-20 bushfires, the Department observed that these capabilities remain critical. No communications technology can guarantee resilience, particularly as natural hazards give rise to telecommunications infrastructure damage and disruptions, including those caused by power outages. However, the Department observes that we can seek to better understand how capabilities, such as Emergency Alert, coped with the demands of the 2019-20 bushfires, also taking into account the limitations observed by the Department as a tool to support mass COVID-19 related communications. These experiences will inform the strategic review into new and emerging telephony-based warnings technologies.