



National Bushfire Recovery Agency

Committee Secretary
Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

4 February 2021

Dear Committee Secretary

Thank you for the opportunity for the National Bushfire Recovery Agency (NBRA) to provide a submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee (the Committee) on *Lessons to be learned in relation to the preparation and planning for, response to and recovery efforts following the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season*. This submission is subsequent to the submission made by the Secretary, Mr Phil Gaetjens of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet on 25 May 2020 (submission 70).

This submission focusses on the relevant issues proposed by the Committee for further consideration in 2021 and provides an update of the NBRA's work in leading and coordinating bushfire recovery across Australia.

The Black Summer bushfires were of a scale never before experienced in recent recorded history. The work of the NBRA continues to provide national leadership and coordination, and ensures a whole-of-government and whole-of-country approach to bushfire recovery. In addition to the work of local councils, state and territory governments and the Australian Government, the response has also involved – and will continue to involve – volunteers, community groups and not-for-profit organisations, businesses and industry groups.

The NBRA continues to work collaboratively on reporting requirements with agencies responsible for the delivery of programs funded through the National Bushfire Recovery Fund (NBRF). Progress updates are provided monthly on the NBRA website.

The NBRA convenes a monthly Federal and State Bushfire Recovery Data Working Group. This Group was created to identify and develop a series of nationally consistent reporting metrics, produce agreed sets of data sharing principles, and continue to ensure all jurisdictions are communicating and referencing the same foundation datasets.



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Updated funding and expenditure

As at 31 December 2020, \$1.3 billion had been spent from the National Bushfire Recovery Fund (NBRF). This money has either already been spent or is being reimbursed to state and territory Governments under existing Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA). The NBRF has a total allocation of more than \$2 billion to ensure support remains available as affected communities move into medium and longer-term recovery. A further \$660 million in Australian Government assistance has also been delivered through other existing disaster support mechanisms to assist communities affected by the 2019-20 bushfires.

Attachment A provides details of support being provided through the NBRF. The NBRA funding factsheet¹ also provides a detailed breakdown of funding to date. The factsheet provides transparency to the public and is an easy-to-read summary of the available Commonwealth recovery support and the roll-out of related programs and funds.

Some of the more specific support measures announced by the Australian Government include the support for small business grants, primary producer grants, concessional loans, and targeted assistance for wine grape growers and apple growers. The data below is current as of 13 January 2021. The totals represent the total funding provided and does not provide a breakdown of Commonwealth and state / territory contributions.

Support measure	Applications received (no.)	Applications approved (no.)	Applications approved (\$)
Small Business Grants (\$50,000)	4,412	2,122	\$57,611,905
Small Business Support Grants (\$10,00)	24,790	21,204	\$212,040,000
Primary Producer Grants	4,068	2,803	\$172,909,266
Concessional Loans	966	528	\$43,606,679
Wine Grape Smoke Taint Grants	73	57	\$550,000
Apple Growers Grants	29	12	\$74,000

The 2019-20 bushfire season – and the level of recovery one year on (including the progress and status of recovery efforts)

The NBRA has worked closely with Emergency Management Australia (EMA) to ensure that support available under the DRFA is as responsive as possible to the recovery needs of individuals, businesses and primary producers as possible. This includes establishment of new types of recovery grants for local councils and small businesses, revision of eligibility requirements for primary producers to make it easier to access grants, boosting the value and

¹ <https://www.bushfirerecovery.gov.au/progress-to-date/funding>



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concessions for loans on offer to small businesses and primary producers, and enabling support for (re)building infrastructure as part of local economic bushfire recovery programs.

The NBRA is proud to have made a difference during the past 12 months for communities recovering from the Black Summer bushfires. The experience of recovery will be different for everyone, and it will happen at a pace that reflects the needs of individuals and communities, especially those who have faced the impacts of multiple disasters and stressors.

In November 2020, the NBRA released *The Journey to Recovery* ([Attachment B](#)). The Journey to Recovery describes the collaborative approach being taken across Australia to recover from the devastating Black Summer fires.

Bushfire debris clean-up of both insured and uninsured properties remains a priority for the NBRA, and plays an important role in psychological recovery after traumatic events. In January 2020, the Prime Minister and the Premiers of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia agreed to cost-share bushfire debris clean-up under Category D of the DRFA. A total of 4,954 properties were eligible for debris removal and as of 31 December 2020, 4929 properties have been safely cleared. All residential and commercial properties have been cleared in Victoria, while one remaining property in South Australia is due for completion in January 2021. In New South Wales, clean-up of residential properties is mostly complete, with 24 properties that have ongoing significant safety or access concerns.

There are some achievements and milestones that particularly stand out as reflections of the NBRA point of difference. Many of these milestones represent a step change in the Commonwealth's approach to disaster recovery.

Recovery Support Officers

The NBRA has introduced a network of 30 locally recruited and community-based Recovery Support Officers (RSOs). NBRA Liaison Officers who are embedded in state offices in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia are supporting the RSOs. Together, this liaison network is working directly with state and local governments and communities to ensure that bushfire-affected individuals are accessing the support and resources that are available. The Liaison Network also provides direct and first-hand insights on recovery needs and progress at the local level, which assists Commonwealth awareness, understanding and decision-making.

Social media engagement

It was evident in the early stages of the NBRA that national messaging about recovery support either was not reaching impacted communities or was being misinterpreted. In response, and in a rare style of engagement for a Commonwealth agency, from March 2020 the NBRA



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started to engage directly with members of bushfire-affected communities through instant messaging on Facebook and the NBRA website. To-date, the NBRA has directly assisted more than 1500 individuals using instant messaging.

This approach has been instrumental in directly assisting individuals to access a wide variety of support including mental health assistance and funding. The NBRA Digital Media team triages initial contacts and escalates them to the Liaison Network for further action. Both teams engage in genuine and empathetic conversations with individuals.

One powerful recent example is an individual who had been experiencing daily suicidal feelings and intentions. The individual was immediately (with consent) referred to the Mental Health Triage Line for a priority home visit. Within 24 hours, a number of issues had been addressed including access to Services Australia payments, rent assistance and charity support. The individual had a Mental Health Plan in place, had commenced medication and obtained an appointment with a psychiatrist.

This is one of many examples of meaningful assistance provided on a daily basis through the NBRA's direct engagement.

Interactive tools and resources

The NBRA capitalised on an opportunity to better support our recovery partners with the release of a profile for each of the LGAs activated during the bushfires. This analysis provided our partners with a consistent set of data that outlined the impacts within a LGA, including a map of the burnscar, while also generating awareness of the level of support individuals and businesses were accessing. These profiles have been utilised by local governments and the community to target recovery efforts.

Following the success of the LGA profiles, the NBRA published an interactive online map that allows governments and communities to explore the unique profiles of bushfire-affected regions and to see what recovery programs have been funded and where they have been rolled out. The map brings together population data and information on bushfire recovery into a powerful online interface.

The NBRA has also made several resources available which are used by parliament, media and the public to follow recovery progress. Following the Government's final decisions regarding the allocation of the NBRF, the NBRA began publishing the Commonwealth Bushfire Relief and Recovery Funding Factsheet (Factsheet) on the NBRA website from May 2020.



Insurance issues – the effects of fires on insurance premiums in fire affected regions (one year on from the 2019-20 fire season)

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Recovery Arrangements (Royal Commission) noted that communities across Australia will be increasingly exposed to natural hazard risks, with the frequency and severity of extreme weather likely to increase. In turn, this is likely to result in continued growth in the cost of insurance products for residential and commercial consumers while also increasing the cost of reinsurance for the insurance sector itself.

According to the Insurance Council of Australia (ICA), by January 2021, insurers have received over 38,000 claims with losses of \$2.3 billion. Over 90 per cent of claims lodged have been assessed and closed.

Through our work with governments, the private sector, charities and communities, we are aware of a range of challenges and sensitivities regarding insurance losses associated with the Black Summer bushfires and the potential impacts of the fires on insurance affordability and community rebuilding.

The NBRA has met with the ICA and state and territory governments to promote information sharing and to help identify opportunities for governments and the insurance industry to work together to address concerns.

National Resilience, Relief and Recovery Agency

On 13 November 2020, in response to the Royal Commission, the Prime Minister announced the Australian Government will establish a new, dedicated National Resilience, Relief and Recovery Agency (NRRRA) to drive natural disaster risk reduction, enhance natural disaster resilience and ensure effective relief and recovery for all hazards, commencing no later than 1 July 2021.

The work of the NBRA will be integrated into and will continue as part of the NRRRA.

The 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires were an extraordinary event, requiring an extraordinary and response. One year on, the NBRA continues to build a strong community-centred approach to bushfire recovery. The NBRA listens closely, adapts and implements, based on the principle that communities and individuals recover at their own pace and best understand what support is required to help them rebuild.



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Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Committee. Should the Committee require further information, please do not hesitate to contact my office on 02 6271 5085.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Colvin APM OAM

National Coordinator

Breakdown of National Bushfire Recovery Fund allocation and expenditure – 31 December 2020

Measure	Portfolio <i>(including reporting program where available)</i>	Allocation (\$m)						Spent (\$m) (31 December 2020) (a)
		2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	Total	
Social and Community								
Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements – Other Category C and Category D Funding (including Debris Clean-Up)	Home Affairs (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	220.4	225.5	-	-		445.9*	445.9*
Immediate Bushfire Assistance to Local Governments	Prime Minister and Cabinet (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	62.0	-	-	-	-	62.0	62.0
Supporting the Mental Health of Australians affected by Bushfires (b)	Health (2.1 Mental Health and 4.1 Medical Benefits)	16.3	30.6	6.5	-	-	53.4	21.5
Additional Emergency Relief and Financial Counselling for Bushfire Affected Communities	Social Services (2.1 Families and Communities)	50.0	-	-	-	-	50.0	50.0
Back to School Support	Home Affairs (1.10 Australian Government Disaster Financial Support Payments)	34.0	-	-	-	-	34.0*	35.3
Assisting Families in Bushfire Affected Areas (c) (d)	Education, Skills and Employment (1.2 Child Care Subsidy)	-	22.2	1.5	0.1	0.1	23.9*	25.9* CCS activity test debt is calculated as part of reconciliation at the end of each financial year
	Social Services (1.1 Family Tax Benefit)	1.9	0.2	0.0	-		2.0*	
Mental Illness Support for Emergency Services Workers	Home Affairs (1.7 National Security and Criminal Justice)	10.5	4.0	1.4	-	-	15.9	11.6
Compensation for Volunteer Firefighters (e)	Home Affairs (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	15.0	-	-	-	-	15.0*	11.6
Community wellbeing support	Health	-	6.7	6.8	-	-	13.5	6.7
Legal Assistance Services to Support Bushfire Relief and Recovery	Attorney-General’s (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	2.9	5.8	-	-	-	8.7	8.7
Mental Health Support for School Communities	Education, Skills and Employment (1.5 Early Learning and Schools Support)	4.0	4.0	-	-	-	8.0	8.0

	Education, Skills and Employment (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	2.0	-	-	-	-	2.0	2.0
Economic								
<i>Regional Bushfire Recovery and Development Program</i>	Prime Minister and Cabinet (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	-	158.6	149.9	140.0	-	448.5	111.4
<i>\$10,000 Grants for Small Businesses</i> (f)	Prime Minister and Cabinet (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	204.9	29.1	-	-	-	234.0*	195.6
<i>Emergency Bushfire Response in Primary Industries Grants Program</i> (g)	Agriculture, Water and the Environment (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	85.8	55.3	-	-	-	141.0*	128.7
<i>Bushfire Recovery Plan for the Tourism Sector</i> (h)	Foreign Affairs and Trade (1.1. Foreign Affairs)	5.0	-	-	-	-	5.0	37.1
	Foreign Affairs and Trade (1.7. Tourism Australia)	41.5	29.5	-	-	-	71.0	
<i>Enhanced Grant Assistance for Small Businesses and Concessional Loans</i> (i)	Prime Minister and Cabinet (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	58.9	9.5	-	-	-	68.4*	85.0
<i>Forestry Recovery Development Fund</i>	Agriculture, Water and the Environment	-	10.6	20.2	10.2	-	41.0	Funding started on 1 July 2020 – applications under assessment
<i>Primary Producer - Back to Business Grants for Apple Growers</i>	Agriculture, Water and the Environment (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	-	31.0	-	-	-	31.0	0.1
<i>Rural Financial Counselling Service</i> (j)	Agriculture, Water and the Environment (3.12 Rural Programs)	3.8	7.5	3.8	-	-	15.0	11.3
<i>Forest Industries – salvaged log transport</i>	Agriculture, Water and the Environment (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	-	15.0	-	-	-	15.0	Funding started on 1 July 2020 – NSW applications under assessment, VIC grant agreements being finalised
<i>Two-year Business Advice for Recovery and Resilience</i> (k)	Industry, Science, Energy and Resources	-	6.4	6.4	-	-	12.8	1.8

<i>Primary Producer - Back to Business Grants for Wine Producers</i>	Agriculture, Water and the Environment (States/Territories responsible for delivery)	-	5.7	-	-	-	5.7	0.6
<i>Small Business Financial Counselling for Bushfire Affected Communities</i>	Treasury (1.1 Department of the Treasury)	1.0	1.5	0.9	-	-	3.5	1.0
Infrastructure								
<i>Telecommunications Emergency Resilience (1)</i>	Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications	-	12.2	15.0	-	-	27.1	0.1
<i>Additional Fire-fighting Aircraft</i>	Home Affairs (1.7 National Security and Criminal Justice)	20.0	-	-	-	-	20.0	20.0 (Payment in 2019-20)
Environment								
<i>Bushfire Recovery for Native Wildlife and Habitats</i>	Agriculture, Water and the Environment (1.1 Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and the Environment)	-	76.5	73.1	-	-	149.7	1.1
<i>Bushfire Immediate Wildlife Rescue and Recovery Program (m)</i>	Agriculture, Water and the Environment (1.1 Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and the Environment)	28.3	25.1	-	-	-	53.4	46.8
<i>Bushfire Recovery Evaluations</i>	Prime Minister and Cabinet	-	0.5	0.3	0.5	-	1.3	Funding started on 1 July 2020 – service provider has been selected
TOTAL		868.1*	773.0*	285.8*	150.8*	0.1	2,077.8	1,329.4*

Notes

- (a) Figures are based on reporting to the National Bushfire Recovery Agency and do not reflect final end of financial year reconciliations. Payments may exceed initial commitments as estimates are not available in some cases and some measures are demand driven. All amounts are rounded to the nearest decimal point.
- (*) Estimates only or no estimates available as program is demand driven or reliant on claims.
- (b) This measure has a difference between fiscal balance and underlying cash balance of \$0.66 million – the fiscal balance is reported here. The measure also includes funding for Veteran's Affairs (\$0.7 million) and Services Australia (\$0.2 million).
- (c) Measure involves revenue foregone through debt exemption. It is anticipated the true benefit of this program will be seen at the end of the financial year when reconciliations occur. Measure profile is reported consistent with the July 2020 Economic and Fiscal Update.

- (d) The Government has also announced \$5 million for the expansion of Community Child Care Fund Special Circumstances Funding – this is an existing appropriation.
- (e) This program has now closed. Original allocation of \$60 million was adjusted to reflect actual take up with unspent funds reallocated to support increased demand for the Emergency Bushfire Response in Primary Industries Grants Program.
- (f) This is the total amount of funding spent by the Commonwealth from the National Bushfire Recovery Fund. If State and Territory contributions are included, the total amount of funding released via this program is \$212.0 million.
- (g) This allocation has been increased to take into account an updated estimate of demand. The spend amount reported is the total funding spent by the Commonwealth from the National Bushfire Recovery Fund. If State and Territory contributions are included, the total amount of funding released via this program is \$172.7 million.
- (h) Unused finding from 2019-20 has been re-phased to 2020-21.
 - (i) If State and Territory contributions are included, the total amount of funding released via this program is \$101.2 million. This total includes \$43.6 million for loans approved which are not direct and immediate payments from the NBRF.
 - (j) The recently announced expansion of the RFCS to cater for small business affected by drought, COVID-9 or the 2019-20 bushfires, will not be funded under the NBRF.
- (k) The Government has also provided \$88.1 million over 12 years from 2020-21 (\$26.2 million to end 2023-24) to transition to a new National Research Centre for Disaster Resilience.
 - (l) This measure also includes a further \$10.0 million in 2020-21 from an existing appropriation.
- (m) Estimates in 2019-20 include \$13 million transferred to the States from the Treasury portfolio.