

Senator Louise Pratt
Chair of Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator Louise Pratt

I'm writing to share with you and the Committee my personal insights into attitudes in the Australian community about catastrophic risk relevant to your inquiry into the *Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022*.

I'm a community leader who, both in Australia and overseas, has focused on bringing together people who care about doing good in the most effective way possible, including those who place special weight on doing good for future generations. I've been a full time working professional for over ten years and hold a BSc Honours degree in Economics and Philosophy from a highly regarded university in the UK.

I've met many hundreds of people and discussed with them their personal values and what ways of doing good they think should be prioritised - both in their own actions as well as by governments and policy makers. These people are deeply motivated to do good, and collectively donate millions of dollars to highly impactful causes, like combating malaria or vitamin-A supplementation programs.

What they lose sleep over, and often feel disempowered to address, is the kinds of global catastrophes that have the potential to kill millions. The nature of these crises challenges the ability of well-meaning individuals to take effective action. Only governments are in a powerful position to ensure mitigations are put in place before a crisis happens.

Effective altruist groups meet regularly in most universities and large cities across Australia - and catastrophic disasters are one of the main topics of conversation. I've just returned from the Effective Altruism Global conference where 1,500 people from around the world, including a large Australian contingent, gathered in Washington DC. Preparation for catastrophic disasters was the key theme of the conference. The community is seized by these issues.

Many people have commented to me with alarm that most governments seemed relatively unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the fact that pandemics have occurred regularly throughout history. Governments, including our own, scrambling to buy personal protective equipment (PPE) in early 2020 suggested that even basic risk mitigations and resilience measures were not in place. People worry

that government and critical infrastructure operators are equally (or even more so) unprepared for other catastrophic disasters.

I've also heard the view that the reason governments don't adequately prepare for lower-likelihood events is the fundamental short-termism of democratic election cycles. A near-term spend on flood or fire risk mitigation might look good to a local electorate, whereas preparation for catastrophic events are not visible or well understood. Government spending should be based on evidence and defensible risk assessments that ensure maximum value for public money.

The *Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022* is an opportunity for you to ease the concerns of the community and build trust that the government is concerned about the long term. It would be aligned with views of the people I've engaged with if the Bill was amended to ensure that at least some of the funding is ear-marked only for preparing for catastrophic disasters - ensuring that the entire fund is not spent only on preparing for fires, floods or storms.

The potential for positive impact here is substantial. Ensuring spending occurs across the full diversity of threats would have significant long-term benefits. In the same way we wished we had simple things in advance of COVID-19, like a larger and more complete PPE stockpile, we may wish in the future that we were better prepared for other catastrophic natural disasters. A small change to this bill to earmark funding for catastrophic disasters would make a substantial difference in ensuring Australia is better prepared for future catastrophes. It would also be a chance for Australia to show global leadership. I'd be proud to go to future international conferences and be able to talk about what Australia is doing in this space and encourage others to follow our example.

These views are my own and based on a range of interactions I've had. I don't claim to be a formal representative of any community or speak for any particular organisation.

Regards,
Manisha Lishman
7 October 2022