



Australian Government

Austrade

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE FINANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE INQUIRY 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

The Australian Trade and Investment Commission (Austrade) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee inquiry into lessons to be learned in relation to the preparation and planning for, response to and recovery efforts following the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season (the inquiry).

Context

Austrade is responsible for assisting Australian businesses to develop international markets, attracting foreign direct investment into Australia, promoting the Australian education and training sectors, and developing policy and programs to support Australia's tourism sector. Austrade achieves this through a network of offices throughout Australia and across the world.

The 2019-20 bushfires affected all sectors for which Austrade has responsibility, with the tourism sector the most significantly impacted. In responding to the bushfires crisis, Austrade worked closely with our portfolio partners - the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Tourism Australia (TA) and Export Finance Australia (EFA), other Commonwealth agencies, and state and territory governments. DFAT, TA and EFA have completed separate submissions to this inquiry.

Response: Managing the Risks to Australia's Interests

Australia's Tourism Industry: In early January 2020, Austrade activated the National Tourism Incident Communication Plan (NTICP). The NTICP is a flexible mechanism activated during times of crisis, opening channels of communication between the Australian Government, states and territories, and peak tourism industry associations. This mechanism enabled coordinated communication regarding the impact of the bushfires, and government and industry recovery initiatives.

Austrade chaired regular meetings of the Australian Standing Committee on Tourism (ASCOT) to gain insights and intelligence on the bushfire impacts on the tourism sector from state and territory officials.

Both ASCOT and the NTICP are part of the national governance arrangements to implement Australia's long-term tourism strategy, *Tourism 2020*.

On 16 January 2020, the Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment led a forum with tourism industry participants and the broader visitor economy sectors, which focussed on impacts in the tourism sector from the bushfires. Industry and ministerial teleconferences have continued since.

Insights gained through the NTICP and ASCOT, and Austrade's ongoing outreach to the tourism sector were used to inform portfolio agencies and the Minister on impacts on the tourism sector, along with advocacy and policy development efforts to assist the tourism industry recover.

Australia's Education Industry: Austrade is the lead agency for the promotion of international education, working closely with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment as the policy lead. Austrade directs brand, messaging, client and content engagement onshore and delivers campaigns, events and targeted digital services in key markets. Throughout the 2019-20 bushfires, Austrade gathered intelligence, including surveying international education agents in late January 2020, and students and parents in seven key international markets February 2020. Austrade sought input from states and territories and education peak bodies through established fora such as the International Education Marketing Forum. This intelligence informed Austrade's campaign to address

concerns of international students and their parents about the bushfires, and related advocacy points for the Australian Government.

Austrade supported the Secretariat to the Global Reputation Taskforce (Taskforce) under the Council for International Education. This taskforce, consisting of government and industry representatives, provided advice about protecting Australia's position as a leading provider of international education. The Minister also joined a number of the Taskforce's virtual meetings.

Recovery

Program responses: Austrade worked with other government agencies to develop policy and programs to assist our export industries to recover from the bushfires. One of these programs, the Regional Tourism Bushfire Recovery Grants Program, part of the Australian Government's \$76 million Rebuilding Australian Tourism Package, is administered by Austrade.

Industry Engagement: Austrade identified businesses affected by the bushfires and adjusted the support we provide to exporters. For businesses currently accessing Austrade services, fees were waived. Austrade focussed on directly communicating with bushfire affected businesses. We also engaged through the business.gov.au contact centre. The contact centre reached out to affected business, sending an email to around 300 businesses who had previously enquired about small business packages with an update on available funding in January 2020.

Response: Understanding the Risks to Australia's Interests

The Australian Government managed its response to the bushfires centrally through portfolio level coordination, recognising the scale and impact of the disaster necessitated a highly coordinated effort. At the portfolio level, Austrade worked with portfolio agencies to understand changes in global sentiments resulting from the bushfires, as well as develop and implement advocacy efforts to address negative impacts, particularly in relation to our most impacted industries: tourism and education.

Lessons learned – Global Perceptions Monitor: In late February 2020, Austrade conducted a survey exploring international perceptions of Australia in light of the bushfires. This research ran in seven markets and explored perceptions of Australia's reputation with regards to trade, education, tourism and investment. Positive sentiment towards Australia declined immediately following the bushfire season, with the largest decline in China and the United Kingdom. The bushfires most negatively impacted the small group who already had low sentiment or engagement with Australia. Despite sentiment declining, the survey also found Australia still has a strong reputation among the global community, highlighting Australia's resilient reputation built over many years is able to withstand the challenges associated with the bushfires and other global issues.

Further Discussion

Austrade thanks the Committee for the opportunity to participate in its inquiry, and welcomes any further discussion on the issues raised.