Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022

Yarra Ranges Council

October 2022

Contents

1   BACKGROUND

1.1   Summary

Yarra Ranges Council's submission to the Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022 focuses on three key areas of consideration:

1.   Understanding risk – through data, sharing of information between agencies and leveraging First Nations knowledge and practices
2.   Equity in financial support – to ensure individual receive support to a level that is commensurate with the impact experienced
3.   Community-centred recovery and resilience building – that builds on existing strengths of communities and is sensitive to the impact of trauma on individual's capacity to engage post-disaster.

1.2   Yarra Ranges Council: Unique Assets and Risks

The Municipality of Yarra Ranges is located on metropolitan Melbourne's eastern fringe and is home to a population of about 160,000. Yarra Ranges covers approximately 2,500 square kilometres and stretches from densely populated outer suburbs to foothills, agricultural valleys and forested areas of the Great Dividing Ranges. It is one of Victoria's largest, most varied and scenic municipalities. It is also the largest area of any metropolitan council. There are more than 55 suburbs, townships, small communities and rural areas in the Yarra Ranges.
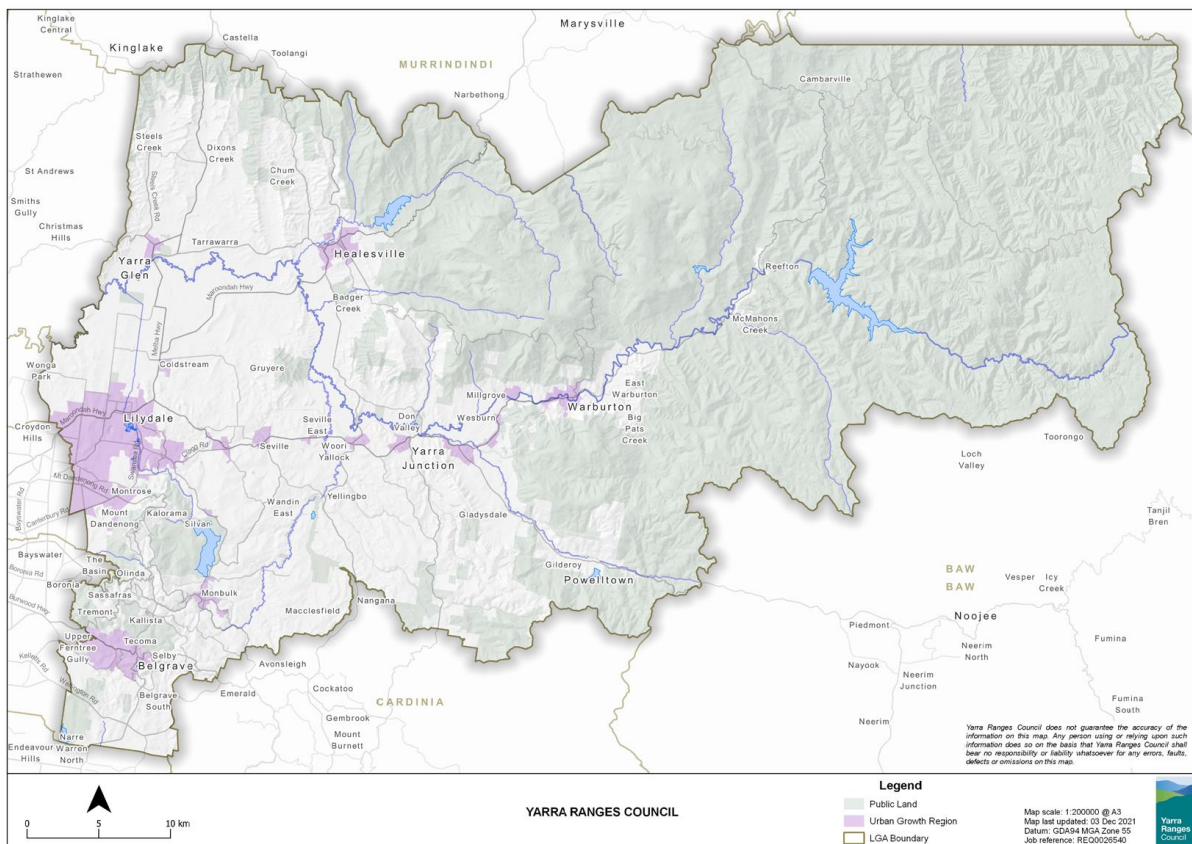

Figure 1: Geographic Boundary of the Yarra Ranges Council.

Our municipality is a unique mix of urban and regional areas, with around 30% of the population dispersed across non-urban areas that represent 97% of the Yarra Ranges overall landmass.

The natural beauty of the Yarra Ranges is one of its defining aspects. Extensive trees and forest are what makes the area unique and attracts residents to the area and the tens of thousands of tourists that visit each year. Living within this environment has many benefits but also comes with significant disaster risk.

1.3   History of Emergencies

Yarra Ranges has a significant history of emergencies including bushfire, heatwaves, floods, storms, landslides, light plane crashes, road crashes on major highways, and outbreaks of infectious disease. The impact of these emergencies, particularly bushfires and storms, and landslips that often occur in their aftermath, have included loss of life and serious injury, loss of property including homes, disruption to entire communities, devastation of the natural environment, and long-term rehabilitation of affected communities.

It's also important to note that Yarra Ranges carries an ongoing risk of natural disasters, the key example being that the Dandenong Ranges and Upper Yarra are recognised as some of the most bushfire prone areas in the world.

Significant events, in which Council has played a key role in responding and supporting communities to recover, include:

- 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, which killed 10 people and destroyed almost 1,000 buildings across 13 townships in the Yarra Ranges LGA
- 2015 bushfire – Wandin North
- 2016 storms (October), which destroyed 31 private dwellings and caused power and telecommunications outages for 7–14 days
- 2019 Upper Yarra catchment, during which smoke impacted on the network
- June 2021 storm and flood event, which resulted in
    - more than 1,000 homes and business extensively impacted by storm debris
    - almost 5,000 properties impacted by flood
    - more than 3,000 homes without power and internet for more than month
    - 34 communities lost NBN/internet service and were unable to call 000 for assistance.

Our submission offers insights and experiences gained through this history of natural disasters, and the expertise of staff tasked with preparing communities for future emergencies.

We are encouraged by the Australian Government undertaking this critical reform in the area of disaster resilience funding. Through it, we urge the Government to ensure that this expanded investment focuses on building resilience across communities, landscapes and built infrastructure, in a way that works to reduce the impacts of disaster over time. In reforming the fund, we call for roles and responsibilities to be more clearly defined between all levels of government, emergency management agencies and communities. Importantly, we urge the centring of community voices, and inclusion of First Nations perspectives and knowledge across emergency management work.

2   KEY ISSUES AND CONSIDERATIONS

2.1   Understanding Risk

As the Australian Government reviews, amends and implements its policies on disaster resilience, it is critical that this reflects best practice and adopts a future-focused view that enhances systems at all levels, to support community resilience to all types of shocks and stressors – including bushfire, flood, storm, drought, heatwave, cyclone, earthquake etc.

Key frameworks and strategies, such as the [Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2022-2027 (QSDR)](), provide guidance on what this looks like in practice.

A key objective of this strategy and others is 'understanding risk' through the application of data to strengthen risk reduction understanding, culture and education. In this, emergency risk assessments should consider all types chronic and variable vulnerabilities including environmental, social and economic vulnerabilities, and vulnerabilities in our built infrastructure systems, such as energy and telecommunications networks.

However, communities, agencies and networks operating in emergency management currently lack the resourcing and maturity to assess environmental vulnerabilities and risk as well as local social vulnerabilities, to a level that supports effective risk reduction and resilience planning.

For instance, in Yarra Ranges, agencies typically undertake flood assessments at a local level on a year-on-year basis. These assessments consider factors such as areas that are likely to flood but lack the data and local insight to capture details such as the likelihood of flooding and communities' capacity to withstand such an event – which would consider factors such as their capacity to provide self-sustain during periods of isolation, evacuate via alternative routes and means when roads are blocked etc.

With targeted investment and support, agencies and experts can be brought together in partnership to develop more mature assessments of disaster risk, and identify solutions that strengthen disaster resilience, with the potential to contribute to other areas of community wellbeing and liveability of townships and suburbs.

For example, Maroondah City Council have recently undertaken a detailed flood mapping project in partnership with Melbourne Water, Yarra Valley Water and the Victorian Government. The project considered an area in the outer eastern Melbourne suburbs surrounding the Tarralla Creek, which is vulnerable to flooding. The resulting projects addressed drainage issues, established [open space and enhanced waterways](), and delivered a [stormwater harvesting]() project that captures, treats and re-uses stormwater to irrigate four sportsfields in the surrounding suburb.

Moreover, from the learnings of past disaster events, it is clear that the roles of various agencies and networks at local, regional, state and national levels much be more clearly defined.

Best practice models would see national guidance through policy and funding to address chronic and periodic stresses (which also reduce disaster risk), with states providing coordination across regions for both disaster risk reduction as well as response and recovery. The role of local councils and community groups would then be focused on developing localised solutions, particularly in instances of acute, repeat or cumulative shocks. The below diagram, from the QSDR, illustrates this landscape.
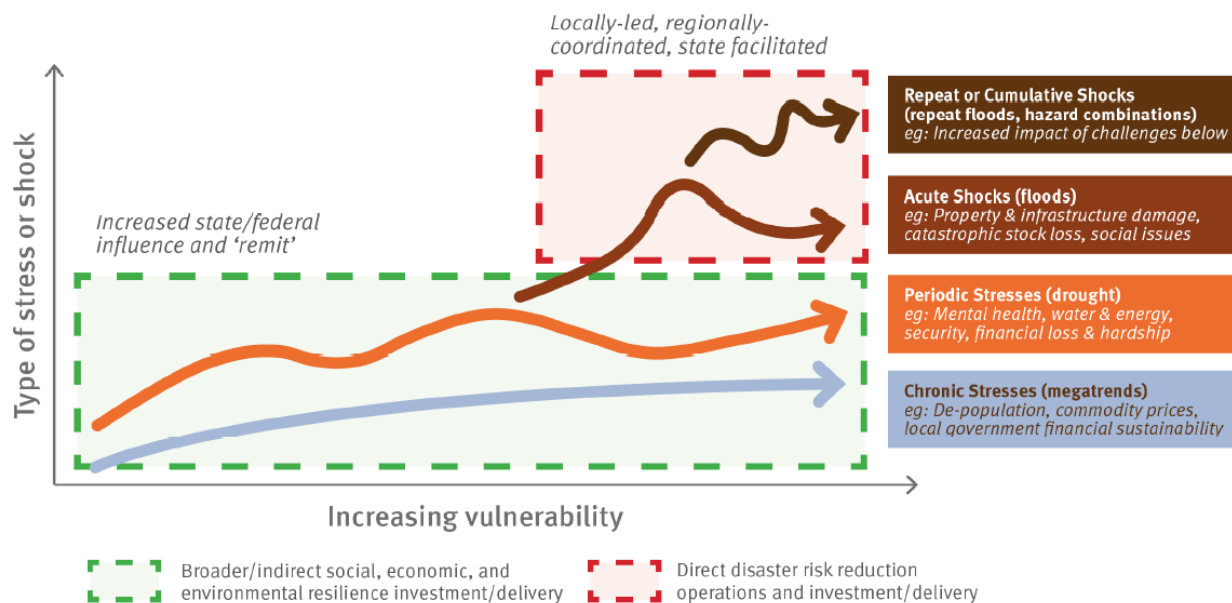
Figure 2. Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience, 'How resilience is affected by stresses and shocks', p20.

Yarra Ranges Council's telecommunications study is an example of how expert data and community insights can be combined with local knowledge and insights, and leveraged through a network of government agencies, community groups and private industries to enhance community resilience.

In 2020, Yarra Ranges Council made a significant investment to understand the accessibility of broadband and mobile service across the municipality, and implications during disaster events. Council undertook a community survey to understand the user experience for residents, and commissioned industry-standard testing of mobile network quality across 24,000+ locations, including along the road network, at emergency relief centres, water tanks, CFA stations and other locations key to emergency management. The results found that 25% of the locations tested had unusable signal or no service at all, and more than 98% of our community relies on internet access for emergency information.

This has illuminated telecommunications issues that limit our communities' capacity to prepare for and respond to disasters, and has guided our advocacy for new and improved infrastructure, including resilience upgrades. It has also supported Council and community to understand the interlinking dependencies between telecommunications and other services such as water, electricity, gas and sewerage, and share this knowledge with state government and other authorities.

Whilst the study has been invaluable in this way, not all local councils have the capacity to initiate and undertake this work. Therefore, supporting data-gathering at a local or regional level through the targeted investment from the Disaster Ready Fund to areas with the greatest risk of disaster (who are often the most under-resourced) will help to address a critical resourcing gap.

There is an emerging opportunity to build in long-held First Nations knowledge, and practices that can be effectively delivered at the local level. An example of this work is Yarra Ranges Council's three-year partnership with the Firesticks Alliance Indigenous Corporation (FAIC), established in 2020 to deliver a Firestick cultural burning program.

Firestick uses the ancient practice of Firesticks or cultural burning on private and public land, to manage fuel loads, increase biodiversity and provide a positive impact on wellbeing. The program aligns with the United Nation's Nature-based Solutions approach to Disaster Risk Reduction.

The application of Indigenous land management practices supports the healing of Country, advances climate change adaptation, and provides space for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to share Aboriginal culture and heritage, creating a platform for Reconciliation to thrive.

There is potential to expand Yarra Ranges Firestick program, and to leverage our experience to contribute to the broadening of the program nation-wide.

2.2   Equity in Financial Support

In reforming the Emergency Response Fund, consideration must be given to the equitable distribution of financial support to communities impacted by disasters of all sizes and types.

The 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires provides a key example of the way in which Australians and indeed citizens overseas provide generous support for large-scale disasters, with $240 million in donations made via the Red Cross. This came in addition to government support payments and provided directly to individuals and state and local agencies.

However, we know that financial support is not easily accessible for all community members, nor has it been distributed equitably across disasters, where the overall scale may differ but the individual impacts on those most affected are similar.

For example, communities impacted by the 2019 Eastern Victorian bushfires in Bunyip State Forest, Victoria (not far from Yarra Ranges) did not qualify for Commonwealth financial support, despite 29 homes being destroyed, as well as 67 outbuildings and sheds. For these communities, the cost, stress and trauma endured is similar if not the same as those communities impacted by the Black Summer bushfires. Further, for these disasters that are smaller in scale but nonetheless devastating, the level of awareness and in turn, response from other communities by way of donations and in-kind support, also differs significantly.

As a result, people who endure damage to property in small-scale disasters, often do not receive financial assistance to the same extent as those with similar experiences in large-scale disasters – and can often result in significant inequity.

This variability in funding, donations and other support should also be considered in making allocations through the Disaster Ready Fund, to ensure all high-risk and impacted communities are supported – not just those that have been subjected to widespread disasters.

2.3   Community-centred Recovery and Resilience-building

Best practice disaster resilience work puts community at the heart of decision-making and seeks to build community capacity to withstand future events through the recovery process.

Within this, the community voice must be captured, amplified and empowered by community-based organisations and networks to build on existing strengths of the community and deliver activities that are tailored to them. This work should also consider that community leadership i.e. a community-led response, is challenging and not always achievable in a fatigued environment, post-disaster.

As such, national recovery principles should be revisited to inform a consistent approach that supports emergency management agencies to work with communities effectively. This should also support stronger engagement with First Nations communities to support cultural recovery post-disaster, and to strengthen representation and cultural safety in all emergency management arrangements, including governance, decision-making and service delivery.

Further, the speed at which disaster funding is distributed post-event is a key factor in shaping communities' capacity to recover. Delays in distributing funds inhibits action on-the-ground and further contributes to stress and trauma felt in the community.

Funds should be sustainable and consumer-centric, in a way that allows people to access funds within their own timeframes, rather than by financial year or end of year periods. This is due to the reality that not all people impacted by a community will be on the same timeframe toward rebuilding and repairing homes and community infrastructure, due to variability in impact and psychological capacity to engage in recovery activities.

Further, recovery funding and support should be made available to communities for the full recovery period. The *10 Years Beyond Bushfires* report – developed by the University of Melbourne in partnership with the Victorian Government, Emergency Management Victorian, Australian Red Cross, Phoenix Australia and the Social Research Centre – recommended that governments establish "a staged 5-year framework for recovery from major disasters to account for extended mental health impacts and support short- and long-term recovery, resilience and community connectedness."

3   CONCLUSION

In reforming the Disaster Response Fund, Yarra Ranges Council urges the Australian Government to:

- Target investments to strengthen risk assessments and data collection at local and regional level, by building capacity and maturity of agencies with relevant expertise
- Clarify the roles of government, agencies and networks at national, state and local levels, and support better sharing of data and insights between agencies
- Support the integration of First Nations knowledge and practices into emergency management practices and disaster risk reduction activities
- Ensure there is greater equity in the financial support provided to communities, based on the level of impact for individuals
- Strengthen the community voice in all emergency management practices, including governance, decision-making and service delivery.