



Ms Ann Palmer
Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Tourism Australia's Bushfire Learnings Submission

Dear Ms Palmer,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee inquiry regarding **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 document is a standalone submission from Tourism Australia (TA) given the significant impacts of the bushfires upon the tourism industry, however, should be interpreted alongside the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's portfolio submission.

Reputational risk mitigation

TA played an important role in seeking to mitigate damage to Australia's reputation as a world-class tourism destination. One of the major issues faced as a result of the bushfire crisis was the misleading, inaccurate and sensationalised media coverage regarding the fires, right across the globe, in many cases exacerbated through social media

At the peak of Australia's bushfires and associated media coverage, TA surveyed consumers across 15 markets and found that awareness of the bushfires was close to or at 100 per cent across all markets. Over half of respondents across all markets believed a quarter or more of the country to be on fire, when the reality was approximately 2 per cent.

TA's response

The importance of providing timely and accurate information

A critical step in countering the misinformation regarding the bushfires was providing our audiences with timely, accurate, authoritative information, and doing this quickly and in an easily digestible and user-friendly way. A critical tool we developed for doing this was via the development of a dedicated webpage on Australia.com. This webpage laid out the facts about the bushfires, provided safety information to prospective visitors and outlined ways to help. This webpage became an authoritative, single source of truth not just for prospective visitors, but for the broader tourism industry including the various State and Territory tourism organisations, regional tourism organisations and tourism products.

Australia's status as a vast country exacerbates situations like the bushfires when international media wrongfully assume the impact is nationwide, when it is usually isolated. Therefore, a key part of debunking various myths was uploading a map to the webpage which highlighted the destinations in Australia which continued to be safe and welcome visitors, with safety classifications determined by State and Territory Tourism Organisations. The map featured the top 30 destinations visited by international travellers in Australia and showed that most of these locations were either not impacted or partially impacted. The map was updated daily during the peak of the bushfires and shared with



our international networks and domestic and international media, all of which were essential to getting the message out and helping address the misinformation. Leveraging authoritative spokespeople, including experts in their field, helped lend further credibility to these messages.

TA's travel alerts webpage - which served as the main source of tourism-related information relating to bushfires prior to the launch of the dedicated webpage on 31 January – was viewed by 193,000 unique visitors at the height of the bushfires in January. Additionally, TA's dedicated bushfire webpage and map was viewed by 27,000 unique visitors following its launch, in the month of February.

Importance of industry leadership and a one voice approach

To help speed up the recovery of Australia's reputation on the back of the bushfires, the Australian Government announced an initial \$76 million Bushfire Recovery Fund on 19 January, \$61 million of which went to TA. The TA funding went towards four major initiatives: \$20 million towards domestic marketing, \$25 million towards international marketing, \$9.5 million towards subsidising Australia's largest tourism trade show and \$6.5 million to amplify the organisation's international media hosting program.

Just four days after the funding announcement, TA launched a domestic recovery campaign, entitled *Holiday Here This Year*, in partnership with the State and Territory Tourism Organisations. The campaign encouraged Australians to travel in their own backyards in an effort to protect jobs, small businesses and local economies. It provided a single platform that united the tourism industry and Australians by helping them understand the importance of domestic tourism, by making a social commitment to booking a holiday in Australia.

TA conducted consumer research in February to test the effectiveness of the campaign and found that 14 per cent of those who had seen it said they had booked a holiday in Australia. And as a result of seeing the campaign, 62 per cent said they were more likely to consider taking a holiday to Australia, with 37 per cent saying they planned on taking a holiday in Australia in the next 12 months.

At the end of February, TA launched its international recovery campaign, building on the successful *There's nothing like Australia* platform, acknowledging the difficulties that the country has faced with the bushfires, while reminding people that *There's still nothing like Australia*. This initial activity aimed to spread the message to the world that Australia is safe, open and welcoming, with all the experiences that international travellers know and love. Importantly, the international campaign promoted destinations across the entirety of Australia – rather than just bushfire-hit areas – due to widespread and inaccurate reporting. The campaign was a partner-driven one across all states and territories, which aimed to get Australia back into market, restimulate demand and drive bookings with conversion-led activities.

The other components of the funding package included refunding attendance fees for buyers and sellers registered for the Australian Tourism Exchange, to acknowledge the recent downturn in tourism and help put money directly back into their businesses. And lastly, plans to expand TA's international media hosting program by bringing down media to explore first-hand bushfire affected regions in Australia so they could then return to their markets and help bust some myths. All of these initiatives were coordinated in close partnership with the State and Territory tourism organisations and the broader tourism industry who were essential in providing feedback and insights.



Importance of adaptability and flexibility of strategies

The evolution of the coronavirus pandemic has forced TA to re-evaluate all of our activities to ensure the organisation is efficiently and effectively using its resources. In the face of travel restrictions effectively curtailing travel to and through Australia, TA has had to adapt and expand its bushfire recovery plans, including pausing all domestic and international marketing, cancelling the Australian Tourism Exchange and suspending all domestic and international media hosting activity until further notice.

TA has developed a research plan to understand how consumer sentiment is changing over time, to help identify the right time to return to individual markets. Each market will be assessed on a case by case basis to determine where they are on the road to tourism recovery and when TA should reinvest, at a time when consumers are willing and able to book a trip to Australia. Critical factors to determine re-entry will include the reopening of local and Australian borders in addition to returning air capacity, consumer confidence, forward bookings and travel intent.

I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Tourism Australia

Terms of Reference

Lessons to be learned in relation to the preparation and planning for, response to and recovery efforts following the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season, with particular reference to:

- a) advice provided to the Federal Government, prior to the bushfires, about the level of bushfire risk this fire season, how and why those risks differed from historical norms, and measures that should be taken to reduce that risk in the future;
- b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;**
- c) the Federal Government's response to recommendations from previous bushfire Royal Commissions and inquiries;
- d) the adequacy of the Federal Government's existing measures and policies to reduce future bushfire risk, including in relation to assessing, mitigating and adapting to expected climate change impacts, land use planning and management, hazard reduction, Indigenous fire practices, support for firefighters and other disaster mitigation measures;
- e) best practice funding models and policy measures to reduce future bushfire risk, both within Australia and internationally;



- f) **existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency;**
- g) the role and process of advising Government and the federal Parliament of scientific advice;
- h) an examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government's response to those impacts; and
- i) any related matters.