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Government buried climate risk action plan

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A federal government plan to prepare for the dire effects of climate change-related natural disasters was left to gather dust in the Department of Home Affairs for 1½ years before catastrophic bushfires hit last month.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework warned the changing climate was exposing the country to natural disasters on “unimagined scales, in unprecedented combinations and in unexpected locations”.

National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework July 2018 ▼

... with the driver of a changing climate there is growing potential for some natural hazards to occur at unimagined scales, in unprecedented combinations and in unexpected locations.

...

The national implementation plan, to be released in 2019, will detail initiatives to be undertaken by all sectors of society to reduce disaster risk and limit the impacts of disasters on communities and the economy.

It warned more and more people and assets would be exposed to these disasters, with essential services – including power, water, telecommunications and financial services – particularly vulnerable.

“As a result, the cost of disasters is increasing for all sectors of society – governments, industry, business, not-for-profits, communities and individuals,” the report warned.

But in the 1½ years since its publication in mid-2018 – weeks before the [leadership coup](#) in which then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull was replaced by Scott Morrison – the federal government has taken little tangible action, and has failed to publish the national implementation plan promised for 2019.

The recent catastrophic bushfires have led to 26 deaths, destroyed thousands of homes and burnt through about 10 million hectares of bush. Bushfire-related insurance losses for the season stand at almost \$1 billion. More than a billion animals may have been killed, wounded or displaced by the fires.

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The government framework laid out a blueprint for a nationally co-ordinated pre-emptive response to the known risks, including increased investment in resilience projects, more research on the nature of risks, a clear accountability regime and a national implementation plan to be published last year.

We've got to get out of the habit of living in ignorance of what's possible.

— Mark Crossweller, former Home Affairs public servant

Mark Crossweller, the former Home Affairs public servant who led the work on the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, told *AFR Weekend* the changing climate required a radical rethink in the way Australians interact with the land, and demanded "compassionate politics".

“Public policy on climate change at all levels of government has been confusing and difficult and there have been no clear policy signals,” he said.

“We cannot rely on historical experience to anticipate future impacts.”

Mr Crossweller said it had been impossible to get proposals adopted “so that significant work can be done in preparation and mitigation”.

“There's still a big gap within the context of existing leadership capability. We need a step-change in addressing climate change in the future.

"We've got to get out of the habit of living in ignorance of what's possible."

The government ignored its own blueprint for a nationally co-ordinated pre-emptive response to known risks. **Wolter Peeters**

He said it was a complex issue that “needs a very skilful narrative and a very compassionate politics”.

"We've got to sit down with people and discuss what are we prepared to lose and what are we not prepared to lose. Because the reality is we will lose things, and nobody wants to talk about that. But that is the reality of living in the Australian landscape."

Resources and forums

Asked what steps had been taken to implement the framework, a spokesman for the Department of Home Affairs said it had "published resources" and "held forums", but gave no examples of concrete initiatives other than one "pilot project" in the freight sector.

The spokesman said the government was "working with states and territories, as well as industry and the community sector, on a national action plan that sets out specific actions to implement the framework".

He did not say when that plan would be published.

The spokesman also referred to government "programs and investments" that were in line with the framework. This could have referred to a 2019 federal budget measure that put aside \$130.5 million over five years to fund disaster reduction initiatives.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton's office did not respond to calls.

Recovery commitment

The federal government has committed \$2 billion to the bushfire recovery effort, while the NSW government has committed \$1 billion.

According to the Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities – a joint venture of IAG, Westpac, Optus, Munich Re and Australian Red Cross – government spending on disaster recovery dwarfs spending on resilience projects.

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It found that between 2010 and 2013, federal and state governments spent about \$2.7 billion a year on recovery, but just \$100 million on resilience.

Optus chairman Paul O'Sullivan, one of the five board members of the roundtable, said it was time for a "step change" in the way nations prepared for natural disasters.

He said the onus was on communities and businesses as well as governments to force the change.

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"Historically it's been very hard for people to see the benefits of disasters that have been avoided, whereas spending money to recover is a lot more tangible and visible," he said.

"So it's an issue for the community, and for us as business leaders. There needs to be more forceful recognition from businesses, communities and governments of the benefit of resilience, even though it won't be as politically appealing."