



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Home Affairs**



# **Department of Home Affairs supplementary submission to the lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20**

**Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee**

11 February 2021

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# Introduction

On 22 May 2020, the Department of Home Affairs (the Department) made a submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Reference Committee (the Committee) documenting initial observations and insights in relation to the portfolio's preparation and planning for, response to, and ongoing recovery from, the 2019-20 bushfires.

The Department thanks the Committee for their work and Interim Report in relation to this inquiry tabled on 7 October 2020. A whole-of-government response to the Interim Report is being prepared.

This supplementary submission focusses on the issues proposed by the Committee for further consideration in 2021 and provides an update on work the Department has progressed to aid recovery from the 2019-20 bushfires, and reduce risk to future hazards.

## Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

On 20 February 2020, the Prime Minister announced the establishment of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (the Royal Commission) in response to the unprecedented 2019-20 bushfire season. The Department engaged extensively with the Royal Commission through the appearances of the Secretary of the Department and the Director-General, Emergency Management Australia and responses to 24 compulsory notices.

On 28 October 2020, the Royal Commission provided its Final Report to the Governor-General, which was tabled in Parliament by the Attorney-General on 30 October 2020. There are 80 recommendations, 55 of which are directed to the Australian Government (in full or part). The Royal Commission makes it clear that while states and territories have primary responsibility for natural disaster response arrangements, there is a greater role for the Australian Government to play in supporting, enhancing and complementing state and territory arrangements.

On 13 November 2020, the Prime Minister released the Australian Government's response to the Royal Commission's Final Report. National Cabinet established the National Emergency Management Ministers' Meeting (NEMMM) to drive and coordinate implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations, including design of ongoing governance mechanisms.

On 11 December 2020, the National Federation Reform Council reaffirmed all jurisdictions have agreed to work collaboratively to implement the Royal Commission's recommendations through the NEMMM. Ahead of the 2021-22 high risk season the NEMMM will focus on:

- the Australian Warning System
- the Australian Fire Danger Rating System
- Nationally Consistent Pre-Agreed Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements
- a review of the path to expeditiously deliver the Public Safety Mobile Broadband
- making substantial progress to reform fundraising laws, and
- making substantial progress to improve natural disaster risk information to support decision-making such as land-use planning for new development, and the construction code.

Hazard reduction data and information will be shared across jurisdictions to maximise its utility and value for hazard risk reduction.

The Department is working with other Commonwealth agencies to implement the recommendations. This will build on work already underway by the Department to ensure that the Department, and the Australian Government, are future ready and well-placed to deal with natural disasters.

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# Recovery following the 2019-20 bushfire season

The Department's submission of May 2020 outlines the programs in place to support communities to recover from disasters. This includes the Commonwealth-state Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment and Disaster Recovery Allowance.

The National Bushfire Recovery Agency (NBRA) leads and coordinates the national response to rebuilding communities affected by the 2019-20 bushfires. Through the Australian Government's National Bushfire Recovery Fund (the Fund), NBRA are coordinating more than \$2 billion in bushfire help for communities.

A number of measures under the Fund are provided through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), which is administered by the Department.

The Department has pre-paid states a total of \$874.91 million in 2019-20 to support severely bushfire affected local governments in their recovery. Payments are generally made after the state has submitted an audited claim for financial assistance. However, due to the unprecedented scale and widespread impact of the 2019-20 bushfires, states received pre-payments for a number of assistance measures under the DRFA to further support their recovery efforts.

## Mental health of emergency services workers

The Department has established a Mental Health Policy Taskforce (the Taskforce) to implement new mental health initiatives for emergency services workers and their families, including volunteers and former or retired workers. The Taskforce is delivering \$15.9 million (GST exclusive) in new policy proposal funding to improve the mental health and wellbeing of emergency services workers.

To help meet this goal, the Black Dog Institute and Fortem Australia are being funded to provide trauma care services to emergency services workers that responded to the 2019-20 summer bushfire season, as well as their families, through to 31 December 2021.

In addition to this work, Fortem Australia is being funded to pilot a social support and mental health literacy network by 31 December 2021. This network seeks to improve mental health outcomes and reduce suicide rates in emergency services workers and their families or kinship groups.

The Taskforce is also developing the first mental health national action plan for emergency services workers. The purpose of the new plan is to identify and implement activities that will see the rates of suicide and mental illness reduce among Australia's current and former emergency services workers.

## National Coordination Mechanism

On 5 March 2020, the National Coordination Mechanism (NCM) was established to provide a centralised coordination function for the whole-of-government non-health response to COVID-19, and to support a consistent national approach, where possible.

The work of the NCM in response to COVID-19 highlighted the importance and efficacy of central coordination systems. From 1 July 2020, the NCM has been embedded as a permanent function within the Department to enhance whole-of-Government coordination arrangements to national crises including bushfires.

The NCM is the lead mechanism within the Department that provides a collaborative platform for inter-agency communication at the Commonwealth, state and territory levels, and supports crisis management responses to issues across a number of sectors, including those impacted by natural disasters. The NCM complements existing arrangements within Emergency Management Australia, such as the Australian Government Crisis Committee and the National Crisis Committee, and draws on newly developed relationships in non-emergency management sectors which may have a touch point in national resilience or recovery efforts.

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The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2019-20 bushfires are significant, with long-term consequences across a number of sectors and communities. The NCM is continuing to support national decision makers by developing plans, guidelines and protocols focussed on supporting economic recovery and preparing vulnerable sectors for future crises. This includes the development of a National Framework for Reopening, published in October 2020, which identifies strategies to support economic recovery in a COVID-safe way, while recognising and complementing existing support measures being provided to those in fire-affected regions. In addition to this, the NCM is working closely with relevant stakeholders, such as the National Bushfire Recovery Agency and the Treasury, to support engagement with the charity and not-for-profit sectors, in light of the significant support they provided to those impacted by the 2019-20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. The NCM will coordinate relevant engagement with charities and the not-for-profit sector for the 2020/21 high-risk weather season.

The NCM is working across the Home Affairs Portfolio and other Commonwealth stakeholders to implement effective systems to support national crises in the future. This includes the NCM engaging with the Australian Public Service Commission and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet regarding a surge database comprising 4,000 staff from across the Commonwealth to support emergency management and crisis coordination. This is expected to be finalised by June 2021.

### Future recovery planning

The Department, through the Community Outcomes and Recovery Sub-committee (CORS) has designed and developed its forward work program to systematically and cohesively deliver outputs over the next two-three years that align with the Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee's (ANZEMC) vision and strategic policy priorities, with the aim to improve the nations' resilience to severe and catastrophic events.

The CORS forward work program focuses on recovery planning for catastrophic crisis and prioritises projects that will enhance Australia's recovery capability and capacity across the five core elements (people, resources, systems, processes and governance) as described in the *Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework*.

Establishing a National Recovery Framework was a key initiative under the CORS forward work program. Through extensive collaboration, a principles-based, CORS and ANZEMC endorsed, interim National Recovery Framework is in place for this high-risk weather season. The National Recovery Framework provides the overarching mechanisms and guidance for government to coordinate and deliver an inclusive set of recovery interventions, which apply to all phases of recovery, all communities, and all hazards.

The forward work program, also endorsed by ANZEMC and CORS, includes planning and model arrangements for recovery from catastrophic crisis, a disaster recovery capability development strategy, establishment of functional domain reference groups across all recovery domains, principles for lessons management/sharing and development of a scalable Recovery Framework. This work will initially inform further capability development and will enable strategic decision making for matters of national significance.

## Hazard and risk reduction

### Hazard reduction

Under Australia's constitutional arrangements, state and territory governments have responsibility for the protection of life, property and the environment within their jurisdiction. This includes bushfire suppression and containment and hazard reduction burning. The Australian Government works closely and collaboratively with state and territory governments to maintain a national level of preparedness.

Fuel management and hazard reduction are important tools in reducing bushfire risk and remain a key input to bushfire hazard and risk modelling. Hazard reduction data and information will be shared across jurisdictions to maximise its utility and value for hazard risk reduction.

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In December 2020, in support of recommendations of the Royal Commission, First Ministers committed hazard reduction data and information will be shared across jurisdictions to maximise its utility and value for hazard risk reduction.

### National disaster risk reduction initiatives

The Government, in consultation with states and territories, committed \$4.23 million towards national risk reduction initiatives that will further support decision makers by providing them with important capabilities and information they need to reduce disaster risk. This funding will be used to improve disaster risk information through capabilities that will eventually form part of Resilience Services announced as part of the Australian Government's response to the Royal Commission.

- A National Bushfire Intelligence Capability to provide nationally consistent and authoritative bushfire hazard and risk information.
- A federated climate information capability to improve access to climate information for decision makers, researchers and others.
- Continued bushfire boundary mapping capabilities and information for the 2020-21 bushfire season.
- The accelerated national roll-out of a prototype smoke forecasting capability.
- A community damage assessment application for post-fire data collection and pre-fire vulnerability assessment.

In June 2020, the Department completed the pilot project to explore the benefits of a national climate and disaster risk intelligence capability for Australia. The final report provides practical recommendations for the development of a national capability based on insights and lessons learned from the pilot. The final report will inform the development of Resilience Services.

### Aerial firefighting

The National Aerial Firefighting Centre (NAFC), established by the states and territories, provides a cooperative arrangement for the delivery and sharing of aerial firefighting resources. The Australian Government acknowledged, before the Royal Commission, the maturity, experience and effectiveness of the operational response capabilities of the states and territories and that the Australian Government has no desire to replicate or replace these capabilities, including in aerial firefighting. The Royal Commission's Final Report, recommended Australian, state and territory governments should develop an Australian-based and registered national aerial firefighting capability, to be tasked according to greatest national need. The Australian Government encourages states and territories to work collaboratively and with industry to build Australian-based aerial fire-fighting capacity, consistent with their sovereign obligations to maintain appropriate operational response capabilities.

While the current model of leasing aircraft through NAFC, rather than purchasing an exclusive fleet, remains the most cost effective and efficient option. The Australian Government has requested the Chief Fire Officers and Commissioners and NAFC to advise on future aerial firefighting options and requirements to meet Australia's fire risk. It is imperative that the Australian Government has a full understanding and informed by evidence, of the capability actually required. This will be pivotal to informing decisions on the future of aerial firefighting to deliver an operationally effective fleet nationally that is scalable, adaptive and provides value for money. This ensures that states and territories are able to access appropriate aerial firefighting capacity when needed most and can introduce new technology as it becomes available.

The Australian Government has committed to support NAFC with an annual contribution of \$26 million indexed from 2020-21. On 23 July 2020, the Australian Government announced \$88.1 million to extend and scale-up funding for critical research into bushfires and natural hazards and would in principle support the use of some of these funds, and/or some of the annual contribution of \$26 million to the NAFC, for research into aerial firefighting capabilities.