



Submission to the Senate and Public Administration Committee Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfire Season

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This submission discusses the Relief and Recovery activities at the community level. It addresses point (f) in the Terms of Reference.

I have conducted interviews with a cross-section of the community's bushfire affected people to determine their views on various aspects of the Relief and Recovery activities by charities, community groups and Government agencies. The respondents were:

- A woman with five children, one of whom is disabled, who had a small farm and suffered a total loss and was insured
- A beef farmer who suffered a total loss, including a large proportion of their herd, whose home was insured
- A single woman on a town property who suffered a total loss and was insured
- A single man on a small rural property who suffered a total loss and was uninsured
- A single woman on a small rural holding who suffered a total loss and was uninsured

Below is a summary of those comments and opinions.

What has worked:

Red Cross and other humanitarian organisation grants; community-led Relief Centres; talking with people who understand the trauma; donated hay and feed drops; Local Sand Services were very helpful with euthanasing and buying livestock.

What hasn't worked and why not:

The level of bureaucracy and the difficulty completing multiple applications. Department of Housing and other agencies were/are manned by people who did not/do not understand trauma. Resistance and lack of customer service and empathy from staff members of Government agencies. Lack of communication and knowing what assistance was/is available due to no internet coverage and power in burnt-out areas. There were issues obtaining the Primary Producers Grant of \$75,000. Industry Bushfire Recovery package neglected the entire red meat sector. Disconnect between Federal and State funding means people have fallen through the cracks. In the days and weeks immediately after the fires, relief workers, eg ADF and people from other agencies were unable to provide basic assistance due to not having the funding or autonomy to provide what was desperately needed. In the end, community members had to look after each other in the best way they could. There is not one answer for all circumstances, a more personal approach needs to be taken for individual circumstances.

What do we need more of:

Inclusive gatherings of primary producers. One on one meetings with people who can help, rather than phone or zoom meetings. People who live in isolated areas are missing the connectivity. There is a serious need for housing in the area, as families now have grown children and their young families living in sheds etc on their properties. Builders and other tradespeople are not able to come to the area as there is nowhere for them to live. The area will lose its young people as they have nowhere to live. A program of affordable housing in the area would be a good idea. More tradespeople are needed as the rebuilding process is taking a very long time, with long waiting lists for tradespeople due to the severe shortage.

What do we need less of:

Beuracracy – agencies should be able to access ATO records etc to ascertain people's situations. Less cynicism. We need more people who understand the whole situation and the level of trauma that people are living with.

Are communities being heard and being allowed to drive a community-led recovery, or is top-down rationality still operating:

Top down rationality is still happening and what is being put in the media is contrary to what is actually happening. Community led Relief Centres are vital, advocating for people still struggling. The need for people who understand recovery is ongoing, as a comforting psychological factor.

What is best practice disaster recovery:

Community-led Relief Centres. These centres are vital. People are able to connect on a personal level and understand individual situations. Housing, housing, housing.....

Are we seeing best practice in operation:

The benevolent societies are doing a fabulous job. The case managers at Bega Valley Shire Council and Service NSW are doing a great job. The humanitarian organisations are doing a great job, however, however the government is not making a "humanitarian" effort, they are making a token effort only.

Are the various levels of government playing a constructive role one year on:

Bega Valley Shire Council is doing well. Service NSW is doing quite well. The assistance from the various levels of government is disjointed with not a lot of communication and transparency. Rebuilding of some homes has stalled due to Council/State legislation regarding Building Entitlements. (Interestingly, National Bushfire Recovery Agency was not mentioned by any of the respondents).

Are funds and resources flowing to where they should be in a timely way:

Donated monies in the form of grants from Red Cross etc are flowing really well. Most respondents said that they had received no government money at all, except for the initial \$1,000 from Centrelink. People are falling through the cracks and not receiving any financial assistance and others are receiving quite a lot.

What is the state of housing, sanitation etc one year on:

The housing situation is appalling. People are still living in caravans, lean-to sheds and Minderoo pods. Dangerous trees and access to properties is an ongoing problem, with no apparent solution in sight. Sanitation is a problem on most properties, there is no public toilet in town and the tip has been closed.

Has private philanthropy (eg Minderoo and others) made a positive contribution:

Yes, Minderoo pod has been amazing. Donated container for storage has been a great help. The work from BlazeAid has been fundamental. Need for Feed was a lifesaver. Team Rubicon (now Disaster Relief Australia) and Social Justice Advocates have been amazing. We would not be as well mentally without that help.

Has there been follow-up, particularly in relation to housing:

Great follow-up from case-worker at Bega Valley Shire Council. Very long time between follow up calls from Service NSW case-worker. One respondent has had no follow-up and has done everything herself.