

**Finance and Public Administration References Committee
Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20**

Submission from Zena Armstrong, independent community advocate, Cobargo

Background and Introduction

Thank you for this opportunity to provide a submission to this important inquiry. I am one of many residents in the Cobargo area who has volunteered time to help our community get back on its feet after the devastating bushfires of 2019/2020. My volunteer work includes fundraising and management of a grant fund as the President of the Cobargo Community Bushfire Recovery Fund. I am also the Director of the Cobargo Folk Festival, a volunteer run festival that is held every year and a committee member of the Yuin Folk Club, an incorporated association based in Cobargo and the producer of the Festival.

I am submitting in my personal capacity, drawing on my personal observations and experiences, and on many discussions with other community volunteers involved in the recovery process in Cobargo and other bushfire-affected areas in NSW and Victoria.

Before retiring to the Cobargo area I was formerly an SES officer in the Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade, where my work included post-conflict recovery in Iraq, diplomatic postings in China and on multilateral climate change and environmental treaties, amongst other responsibilities.

Personal experience in the 2019/2020 fires

I did not lose my home nor any property in these fires, although they came within 50 metres of our house. I am the primary carer of my elderly parents who live in nearby Bermagui, one of whom has advanced dementia. My bushfire experience included managing their evacuation in early January, then staying and defending their home when the repeated calls to evacuate became too much for them, resulting in their decision to stay. My husband stayed on our property to defend.

Cobargo and recovery

I have been involved in assisting community bushfire recovery in Cobargo since the fires. My work has included:

1. Establishing and fundraising for the Cobargo Community Bushfire Recovery Fund Inc www.cobargorecoveryfund.com (CCBRF) which has raised around \$700,000 in donor contributions;
2. Managing the distribution of CCBRF grants; advising and supporting efforts to deliver a broad range of community-led projects that aim to maintain community cohesion, nurture health and wellbeing, and strengthen social capital;
3. Working with other local volunteers to ensure a community consultation process that is inclusive, independent, apolitical and non-discriminatory; and:
4. Coordinating the preparation and delivery of two significant Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund grants, amounting to almost \$7 million. These projects are part of a \$25+ million package of seven Cobargo projects submitted for BLERF funding.

This work has given me an understanding of the many challenges and obstacles for communities seeking to put effect to “community-led recovery”.

Responses to Terms of Reference

- **The respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery; and**
- **the Federal Government’s response to recommendations from previous bushfire Royal Commissions and inquiries.**

Volunteers in Cobargo and the neighbouring village of Quaama mobilised to establish their own relief and recovery efforts as the fires were still burning in our district. Neither were officially authorised. The NSW Public Order and Riot Squad attempted to shut down the Cobargo Relief Centre in the early days following the New Year’s Eve fire, which destroyed so much in our local district. These community-run relief efforts have been very successful and continue today.

Various sectors of the Cobargo community are now deeply engaged in recovery efforts, working together, informed by ongoing community consultation and underpinned by a

Statement of Intent *Cobargo: Working Together in Bushfire Recovery and Resilience* drawn from material provided during the community consultations (see Attachment).

A key question and one for all tiers of government, is how might we ensure that such community-led efforts are recognised and legitimised as credible and appropriate responses to an immediate community need.

A further question is how might governments provide community volunteers working in relief and recovery with the same support as those in emergency services organisations, recognising the complexity and long term nature of such contributions.

Many communities are able and willing to take responsibility for relief response and recovery yet there have been little to no resources available from any tier of government to support such community-led initiatives and no financial funding.

The Cobargo Relief Centre is still running, supported by funding from the CCBRF and a private foundation.

Cobargo's recovery plans are true community-led projects and incorporate both recovery and resilience measures, which is felt to be the best use of scarce government funding. Yet there are no sources of government bushfire recovery funding for this crucial consultative, planning and development phase.

The community has funded its own way, using more than \$93,000 in CCBRF grant funding to pay for architects and for expert help from Australian Business Volunteers - a not-for-profit organisation that sources expertise from NAB, IAG and ARUP. Our community contribution was augmented by funding from Coordinaire, NAB, IAG and ARUP. Without this help we would not have been able to conduct a best practice community consultation, nor prepare the expert project plans, business cases and submissions that have gone forward to the NSW Government's BLER Fund.

I note the Federal Government's intention to establish a National Resilience, Relief and Recovery Agency and was involved in a very early discussion in the design of this new agency. What remains unsolved is how to bridge the gulf between Canberra and the grassroots communities, how to establish policies that are not just 'one size fits all' but allow appropriate practical and compassionate responses to differing community needs; and how

to reach a shared understanding of not just the meaning but the practical implementation of “community-led recovery” .

- **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;**

A clear statement about the need for communities to undertake climate and disaster mitigation and adaptation measures would provide impetus to rural and regional investment and enable communities to move forward on adaptation planning, resilience building, sustainability measures and circular economy practices without impediment. It would also send a clear signal to individual householders that they need to start preparing for more uncertain weather - bushfires, more intense storms and wind events, cyclones, floods, storm surge and extreme hot weather.

Key disaster mitigation measures we are seeking for Cobargo and the region include a more resilient, distributed power network and a fit-for-purpose disaster refuge and evacuation centre. These are two projects for which we are seeking Bushfire Local Economic Recovery funding. Our experience of having to travel through fire to reach distant evacuation centres (which themselves were not adequately fire-proofed) has highlighted the need for more purpose-built facilities in high risk rural areas. Our experience of ten days and more without grid power has underscored the need for more resilient power networks - we have chosen to look at local community-run micro-grids using a mix of renewable and generator power.

- **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;**

The bushfire recovery grant funding processes are complex and opaque. We acknowledge that in NSW these processes are being managed by the NSW Government with the NBRA.

Our village has a big hole through its heart, where one third of our business premises -- and some of the oldest historic buildings in the country - were destroyed in the New Year's Eve Badja Forest Road Bushfire. Many in our community are perplexed by the types of projects that have already received BLER funding and that are being put forward by Councils for funding, many in areas that were not flame-affected and suffered far less, if any, fire damage.

Despite the emphasis on a "community led" process, my experience has been that true community led projects, such as those coming out of Cobargo, are a long way behind in the list of priorities.

As mentioned earlier, there is no bushfire funding available to help us develop our recovery strategy and project plans. Communities like Cobargo have had to rely on their own funding sources to engage the expert help needed to develop a cohesive strategy, conduct the community consultations, develop the project plans and to navigate the complex BLER grant processes.

All this work is being done by local volunteers, who have taken on these responsibilities, in addition to their usual day jobs or pre-existing volunteer commitments. Many have themselves lost homes, businesses or property.

The complexity of the BLERF grant processes, the mixed messaging, the delay in the opening of the fund and the tight initial deadline, placed an undue burden on the volunteer teams working on recovery projects. The dawning recognition of the extent and the nature of the competition for the funding - from well-resourced industry leaders, local councils and State Govt bodies themselves - has added to concerns that despite our best efforts we may fail to win the funds we need to rebuild our shattered village. The shift in focus onto "shovel-ready" projects was a further disappointment to communities who understand that successful project development requires meaningful community consultation.

I acknowledge the assistance of the two NBRA officers, Andrew Grady and Danielle Condon, embedded in the Bega Valley Shire Council, both of whom were excellent and took the time to consult widely and inclusively. We understand from discussions with other communities that we have perhaps been very lucky in the selection of those representatives. We also acknowledge the support of the Anglicare and Red Cross local

recovery officers based in the community. This practice of embedding local recovery officers directly into communities has proved very successful.

Finally, in regard to the work of private donors and foundations, some of which have their own agendas that are not immediately obvious to the community. Many expectations of support have been raised yet remain unmet. The most successful efforts have ultimately come down to the very personal contributions of individuals - many of whom have gone above and beyond to support fire-affected communities.

I would like to see a Code of Conduct governing the engagement of private donors and foundations in disaster-affected areas, similar to the guiding principles of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. These principles provide the foundations for international humanitarian action and are equally relevant in the domestic context.

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this important enquiry.

Zena Armstrong
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