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Submission to the Inquiry into Algal Blooms in South Australia

August 2025



About us

Established in 1914 and by [Royal Charter](#) in 1941, Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. We have a unique humanitarian mandate to respond to disasters and emergencies. This partnership means governments can benefit from a trusted, credible, independent and non-political partner with local to global networks, who will work to implement humanitarian goals in a way that maintains the trust of government and Australian society.

Australian Red Cross is one of 191 Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – the world's largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

The Movement is guided at all times and in all places by seven [Fundamental Principles](#): Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles sum up our ethics and the way we work, and they are at the core of our mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

We remain neutral, and don't take sides, including in politics; enabling us to maintain the trust of all and to provide assistance in locations others are unable to go. Volunteering is in our DNA, and thousands of volunteers and members support us every day, helping solve social issues in their own communities. All our work is inspired and framed by the principle of Humanity: we seek always to act where there is humanitarian need.

Core areas of expertise for Australian Red Cross include Emergency Services, Migration, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Programs, Community Activities and Programs.

Highlights from our [2023-24 Annual Report](#):



16,800+
members and volunteers
acting for humanity



213,000+
Australians supported
during 33 emergency
activations

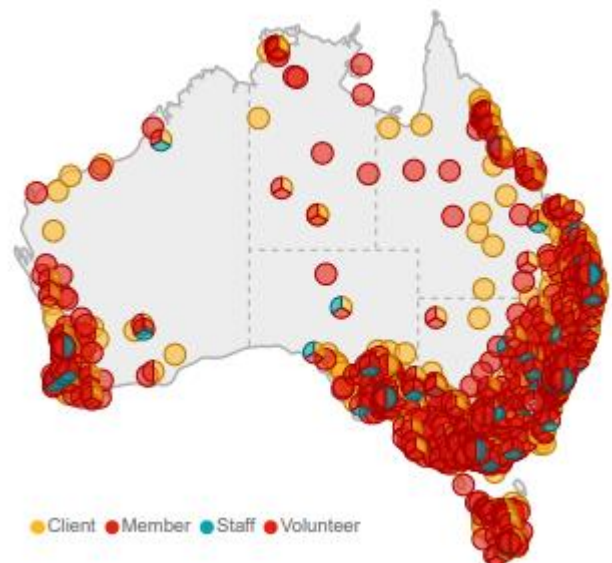


78,000+
social support hours
delivered



23,600+
people from 129 countries
supported through
migration programs

Location of Red Cross people and clients





Purpose

The Australian Government is seeking feedback on the impacts of the South Australian algal bloom, as referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications for inquiry.

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to provide our input to this inquiry. We have focused our response on parts b, d, and e of the terms of reference, noting our extensive expertise and their alignment with the unique humanitarian mandate of Australian Red Cross. This submission will draw on evidence from subject matter experts and programs across the organisation, and particularly on insights from South Australia, to ensure a comprehensive humanitarian perspective is highlighted for the committee.

Summary of recommendations

Australian Red Cross recommends that the Australian Government:

Recommendation 1

Enable and support individuals, households and communities to strengthen their resilience by **investing in psychosocial wellbeing**. This investment will help protect and prepare people and communities for all disruptions and crises, including events such as the South Australian algal bloom.

Recommendation 2

Ensure the psychosocial distress felt by many in the community is responded to and addressed and **provide the necessary resources to facilitate a fast and just recovery**.

Prioritising psychosocial support in response to the algal bloom

- 1.1 Because of its nature, the algal bloom in South Australian waters is not easy or simple to categorise in “disaster” terminology. It has elements of a protracted or slow-onset disaster (no defined start or end, uncertainty around scale, scope, response, declaration and impact). It has elements of a collective trauma event (public witnessing of death and harm, high horror element, media exposure). It is certainly a climate-induced event, given that oceanic warming due to anthropogenic climate change has created the conditions for this algal bloom ([DCCEEW, 2025](#)). It bears some resemblance to an agricultural disaster or disease outbreak (stock losses, contamination, economic disruption). But regardless of how it is classified, the algal bloom is harming people and communities in at least 35 South Australian local government areas.
- 1.2 Australian Red Cross is particularly concerned with the psychosocial impacts, which often go unnoticed and unaddressed in a crisis setting, amplifying and prolonging the harm caused by such events.
- 1.3 The psychosocial impact of traditionally recognised disasters and emergencies is well documented. Black Dog Institute research shows that between 25–50% of people affected by disasters experience elevated psychological distress, with up to 40% developing post-traumatic stress symptoms (Black Dog Institute, 2020). Australian Red Cross partnered with the University of Melbourne to understand the long-term impact of bushfires, which showed that exposure to bushfires increased the risk of experiencing a mental health condition. Ten years after the fires, the likelihood of having one or more of these conditions was still more than twice as high for people from high impact communities compared to those from low or no impact communities ([University of Melbourne, 2021](#)).
- 1.4 In the case of events that are not traditionally considered disasters, similar trends emerge. Primary producers are considered a high suicide risk group in Australia, with poor access to services, community stigma around mental health and limited social connectedness being contributing factors ([Perceval, 2018](#)). When disease outbreaks begin to impact food supplies, such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy and foot and mouth disease, farmer suicides are reported to increase ([Canadian Medical Association Journal, 2003](#)). An ANU study into the impact of drought on mental health in rural and regional Australia showed higher rates of mental health problems for those in affected areas, and unsurprisingly, that the more severe the agricultural impacts, the greater the negative impact on mental health ([ANU, 2014](#)).
- 1.5 Mental health problems are only made worse if a person experiences more than one crisis. Compared to experiencing a single disruption or hazard, experiencing multiple events is associated with higher risks to mental health, worse physical health and higher rates of chronic disease. And predictably, each new disruption hinders a person’s ability to recover from previous disasters ([University of Melbourne, 2022](#)). Concerningly, many of the 35 LGAs currently impacted by the algal bloom have experienced other disasters in recent years – the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires in the Yorke Peninsula, flood events in Alexandrina, Kingston

Psychosocial refers to the psychological (thoughts, cognitions, emotions) and the social (relationships, family, values) aspects of people’s lives. ([IFRC, 2014](#)).

and Robe and the recent Wattle Range bushfires, for example.

- 1.6 The disruption caused by the algal bloom of South Australia is already showing similar patterns to other disasters and emergencies. Australian Red Cross has staff and volunteers across the country and gathers community sentiment in the course of supporting communities to build resilience to all disruptions. For this event, we have been collecting community sentiment by attending and providing psychological first aid at community events. This community sentiment is already reflecting people's worsening mental health and psychosocial wellbeing:

Psychosocial Impact	Australian Red Cross observations ¹
Wellbeing – mental and physical health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distress at seeing dead animals along the beach • Inability, despite community efforts, to save dying animals • Practice nurses reporting higher levels of mental health challenges and general distress • Angst, frustration and stress across surfing communities, many of whom use surfing for psychosocial wellbeing • The algal bloom is increasingly being raised with mental health professionals, and existing mental health supports are already at capacity
Feelings of anxiety from financial insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional supermarkets experiencing loss of business and higher food wastage • Concerns for livelihoods in both the short and long-term • Fishing and seafood industry as well as small business having to reduce staff • Hospitality businesses are reporting low occupancy rates, high cancellation rates, with many annual visitors looking elsewhere due to algal bloom
Loss of social connection and family disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closure or reduced hours of pubs, clubs and cafes limiting people's ability to connect socially • Reduction in regular visits from family and friends, particularly during school holidays • Surfing and other water sport activities reduced or cancelled • Older and vulnerable community members, in particular men, are no longer able to fish, which in some cases is their only social connection, including connecting with their children and grandchildren
Fear and loss of hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep concern over environmental impacts caused by climate change • Uncertainty of when the algal bloom will end • Customers specifically requesting fish from overseas as they are concerned about local seafood • Compounding disasters escalating a sense of fear for the future
Loss of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coastal towns known for beaches and recreation struggling with the stigma attached to the algal bloom

¹ Observations are a summary of community sentiment directly collected by Australian Red Cross staff, volunteers and members working through response and recovery activities in impacted LGAs.



Financial impacts

- 1.7 The fishing industry can expect significant financial impact both on a local scale, as fish populations are impacted by the algal bloom and individuals who rely on fish stocks to make their living lose their income, and on macro scale, as trust and availability impact domestic markets, exacerbating that loss of income further. We should also expect knock-on effects for local businesses who are reliant on fisheries and fishing.
- 1.8 Similarly, tourism is also already experiencing challenges due to the algal bloom, with people changing holiday plans to visit regions not impacted by the algal bloom. Drawing on learnings from other sectors, following the UK's 2001 outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease – it was found that the loss of tourism income far surpassed the cost of the actual outbreak ([UK National Audit Office, 2002](#)).

Social impacts

- 1.9 Many social impacts are generated by loss of income – particularly at the household level. Due to the complex nature of social impacts, it is difficult to separate causes. For example, psychological distress can be caused by both loss of income and as well as direct and indirect exposure to traumatic conditions, such as seeing dead marine life on beaches, previously used for recreation and enjoyment. Uncertainty around compensation arrangements, or delays in the administration and distribution of grants and other compensatory funds is a risk and will increase social stress on impacted communities and businesses. Domestic and family violence often rises in crisis ([Australian Journal of Emergency Management, 2013](#)).
- 1.10 Loss, grief, anger, and loss of control among primary producers, and communities that rely on the marine environment should be considered, as many people in Australia feel a strong connection to the ocean and the animals that live there.

Actions to reduce humanitarian harm

- 1.11 Active across the country and with more than 110 years of experience providing support to people recovering from severe events, Australian Red Cross knows that these kinds of disruptions can deeply impact mental health and wellbeing. Early and adequate psychosocial support for people based on their needs, as well as for the staff and volunteers who provide mental health, psychosocial and practical support, can prevent distress and suffering from developing into severe mental health conditions ([World Health Organization, 2024](#)).
- 1.12 As an event like the algal bloom evolves, ongoing support and outreach provides the necessary holistic response to enable people to recover and prepare for the next disaster or disruption. Nationally consistent emergency and disaster outreach support, tailored to local needs, would strengthen Australia's response to any disaster, and impacted communities themselves are best placed to identify where, when and how these supports will be most effective. Community-led approaches to recovery and resilience are most effective when embedded in planning processes early.
- 1.13 Preparedness and training amongst support agencies is essential for ensuring a nationally consistent, safe, and dignified response to psychosocial needs. There is not a nationally

consistent set of operational guidelines for psychosocial support, and funding for training and capacity building is limited. Incorporating psychosocial considerations into disaster and emergency planning and response for environmental hazards, such as an algal bloom is critical to reduce harm and promote a quick and effective recovery for impacted communities.

- 1.14 Climate change is already escalating the impact and damage caused by disasters. Building resilience by strengthening psychosocial wellbeing in response to the current algal bloom, will not only benefit communities now, it will support communities as they face future disruptions, including future algal blooms.

Recommendation 1

Enable and support individuals, households and communities to strengthen their resilience by investing in psychosocial wellbeing. This investment will help protect and prepare people and communities for all disruptions and crises, including events such as the South Australian algal bloom.

Resourcing a fast and just recovery

- 1.15 An algal bloom may not be seen as a traditional disaster or national emergency, however the financial and social impacts of the algal bloom are similar in nature to that of events that *do* meet the emergency threshold, and it is realistic to anticipate that without early intervention, the consequence of not activating necessary resources would create long-term negative impact on people and their communities in South Australia. While people tend to measure impacts in terms of losses (lives, homes, stock) or costs (recovery expenditure and insurance costs), the true impacts of a crisis are much more complex, interlinked, and systemic in nature.
- 1.16 The scale and impact of the algal bloom on communities justifies a comprehensive response that both validates community concerns and also provides adequate support to impacted communities. Further activating state and federal mechanisms will ensure funding can flow in to support impacted communities and ensure long-term recovery planning can begin as quickly as possible.
- 1.17 Australian Red Cross acknowledges the Australian Government and South Australian Government's joint commitment to a \$28 million support package in response to the South Australian algal bloom, encompassing industry support (including grants and fee relief), science and research, communications, community support, and clean-up efforts. We also note the Australian Government's announcement of an additional \$6.25 million "for grants to assist those local communities who are dealing with these challenges", to enhance CSIRO monitoring and data collection of marine heatwaves, and for algal bloom-related research.
- 1.18 However, while aspects of mental health support are acknowledged in the context of small business resilience, the current package does not comprehensively address the broader psychosocial needs experienced by individuals, households, and whole communities affected by this event. The community's emotional wellbeing, social cohesion, collective trauma, and adaptive capacities remain under-supported. These dimensions are foundational to a truly holistic, equitable, and community led recovery.

- 1.19 Australian Red Cross has extensive experience in dealing with non-traditional disasters and emergencies – such as collective trauma events, pandemic and drought. One of the challenges in such events is the lack of attention, which leaves impacted communities feeling forgotten and alone – compounding the existing psychosocial damage ([Australian Journal of Emergency Management, 2023](#)).
- 1.20 Demonstrating to impacted communities that the scale of the crisis they are experiencing is understood, can help enhance trust and combat the spread of mis- and disinformation ([University of Melbourne, 2024](#)). In other crises that impacted agriculture and livestock, conflicting information led both primary producers, as well as consumers to lose trust in authorities ([Australian Journal of Emergency Management, 2010](#)).
- 1.21 After standing with communities through all types of crises, Australian Red Cross has learned that at all stages, people need to be and to feel supported and validated. Our approach to delivering psychosocial support varies from community to community, because it is informed by and centres local strengths and needs. It often includes measures such as the delivery of [Psychological First Aid](#) (PFA) at public events and forums, door-to-door outreach or phone calls to check on the wellbeing of vulnerable individuals, and capacity building programs that uplift people's ability to support one another, care for themselves and strengthen community wellbeing.
- 1.22 Whether or not the algal bloom is determined to be an emergency or disaster, will not dissipate the bloom or eliminate the conditions that caused it in the first place. But leveraging state and national mechanisms can lessen the impacts for people living in the region by ensuring critical financial and psychosocial support is available when they need it.

Recommendation 2

Ensure the psychosocial distress felt by many in the community is responded to and addressed and provide the necessary resources to facilitate a fast and just recovery.



Conclusion

Disasters and emergencies cause people considerable distress and loss, disrupt people's lives and have long-term emotional and social impacts ([United Nations, 2022](#)). It is commonly acknowledged that recovery from psychosocial consequences of a crisis takes far longer to overcome than physical or material damage ([Australian Business Roundtable, 2016](#)). While many people will recover well with the support of family and friends, some people will experience long-term psychosocial problems. Early psychosocial support for people can assist to minimise distress, connect people with services and identify those who may need further support.

Leveraging all available state and national mechanisms, and appropriate resourcing, to address the impacts of the algal bloom will help mitigate humanitarian harm and ensure people and communities experiencing distress as a result of the algal bloom know that they are supported and visible to the nation.

Services such as those delivered by Australian Red Cross address a critical gap during, and in the immediate aftermath of a crisis – the psychosocial wellbeing of affected people and communities. Ensuring that work is funded and embedded into response and recovery planning, as well as leveraging all available mechanisms to ensure support is available, are critical steps in ensuring people in South Australia have the support they need.

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