



Australian Government

National Emergency Management Agency

# Submission to the Inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

In the spirit of reconciliation NEMA acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and the community. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

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## Introduction

The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), in consultation with the Department of Home Affairs (Home Affairs), welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to support the inquiry into the formation of a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army).

Volunteers play an essential role in Australian communities by helping to build resilience in the face of increasingly frequent and severe natural hazards linked to climate change. Volunteers represent a critical workforce in the community and not-for-profit sectors to support communities impacted by disasters.<sup>1</sup> When disaster occurs, Australia primarily relies on a largely volunteer cohort of emergency management professionals, who assist their community whilst managing competing priorities outside of their volunteer duties.

According to the most recent *Report on Government Service 2025* from the Australian Government Productivity Commission, 213,398 individuals volunteered in fire and emergency service organisations in the 2023-24 financial year. This report indicates that emergency service volunteers accounted for 89% of emergency management response capabilities in 2023-24. Analysis of historical data indicates that there has been a steady decline in emergency service volunteers, with an overall decrease of 31,924 (13%) since 2014-15.<sup>2</sup>

## Australia's changing climate

As in many parts of the world, Australia is experiencing an increase in the frequency, severity, and impact of climate change-influenced disasters. The eighth biennial State of the Climate 2024 report shows Australia is experiencing ongoing, long-term climate change, and has warmed on average by 1.51 ( $\pm 0.23$ ) degrees since 1910.<sup>3</sup> The reports states that “these changes in weather and climate are happening at an increasing pace; the past decade has seen record-breaking extremes contributing to natural disasters that are exacerbated by anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change, including ‘compound events’, where multiple hazards and/or drivers occur together or in a close sequence, which intensifies their impacts.”<sup>4</sup> Volunteers, who contribute significantly to emergency response across Australia, are a crucial resource for responding to these increasingly severe natural disasters.<sup>5</sup>

## Australia's constitutional arrangements

Under Australia's constitutional arrangements, state and territory governments have primary responsibility for emergency management within their jurisdiction. States and territories are the first responders to any incident that occurs within their jurisdiction and have primary responsibility for the protection of life, property and the environment. The jurisdictions are also responsible for fire and emergency services' capacity and capability development, which should have processes in place to take into account both current and future natural disaster risks.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jack McDermott, [Volunteering and Australia's crisis resilience](#), Volunteering Australia, May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> [Report on Government Services, 2025](#)

<sup>3</sup> [State of the Climate 2024](#), CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Tsai, Newstead and Lewis, [Emergency volunteering: Leading engagement and retention](#), Volunteering Australia, September 2022, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> [Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report](#), 28 October 2020, p. 157-158

State and territory fire and emergency services are comprised of career and volunteer personnel. Arrangements for these volunteer personnel are therefore the responsibility of state and territory governments. A number of non-government organisations also provide emergency management services, particularly during response to a crisis. How these volunteers are integrated into the jurisdiction's response is also a matter for state and territory governments.

## Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience: Boots on the Ground

The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience was established by resolution of the Senate on 30 November 2022 to inquire into Australia's preparedness, response and recovery workforce models and alternative models for disaster response and recovery. This included consideration of the role of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services.

The Committee released its final report *Boots on the Ground: Raising resilience* on 8 August 2024 which included 10 recommendations to Government. The recommendations propose a range of initiatives, including changes to jurisdictional funding arrangements and improvements to volunteer support. The report also recognised that strengthening alternative capabilities would allow the ADF to focus on its primary responsibility of the protection of Australia's national security.

Recommendation 10, which was agreed in the Government Response to the Report, calls on the Australian Government to consider ways to incentivise young Australians to participate in volunteer organisations that provide support for disaster response and recovery. As noted in the Government Response, both Home Affairs and the Department of Social Services have undertaken extensive consultations with the community about supporting volunteer organisations and volunteers, including boosting the participation of young people and increasing volunteer numbers. While some measures are under consideration, no decisions have been taken to date.

## Disaster Relief Australia

Disaster Relief Australia (DRA) operates in the relief and recovery space, deploying to communities in need at the request of local, state or territory government agencies, integrating into existing emergency management arrangements and working through local government disaster recovery centres. DRA also provides a sense of purpose, identity and community to all of their volunteers, including veterans. Providing an increased opportunity for veterans to serve the Australian community supports positive physical and mental health outcomes for veterans and their families.

At the October 2022 Budget, the Australian Government agreed to provide \$38.3 million over four years to DRA to upscale their organisational capacity and operations and on-board an additional 5200 volunteers to achieve a total of 7,436. Since the commencement of the grant activity in December 2022, and as of 31 December 2024, DRA have grown their volunteer numbers from 2,236 to 5,019, an increase of 2,783, strengthening their position to respond to deployments during the higher risk weather season.

An increased DRA volunteer base provides an alternative for the Australian Government to deployment of the ADF during relief and recovery operations. DRA's veteran-led operating model provides a trained, on the ground force during relief and recovery efforts, with capabilities including incident management, damage and impact assessment, disaster mapping, debris management and spontaneous volunteer management.

Through the grant arrangement, the Australian Government is able to send DRA a task-request under the Australian Government Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN), where the request aligns with DRA's

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capabilities. The Australian Government deployed DRA four times during the 2023-24 higher risk weather season, with deployment costs covered by the Commonwealth grant agreement:

- logistics support to the Northern Territory bushfires;
- impact assessment assistance to the Northern Territory following bushfires;
- clean-up operations in South East Queensland post storms; and
- support to Far North Queensland post Tropical Cyclone Jasper.

## Health and Wellbeing of Volunteers

Appropriate safeguards are important to support the mental health and wellbeing of volunteers engaged across the crisis management continuum. Research shows that first responders to disasters, including volunteers, can face higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder than the general population.<sup>7</sup> Volunteers also face a higher rate of diagnosed health conditions at some point in their lives compared to the general population.<sup>8</sup>

In 2023, the Australian Government released the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework (the Framework) to help Australia prepare for the impacts of the changing environment. The Framework recognises the importance of collaborative and well-coordinated action in support of mental health and wellbeing for disaster-impacted communities. It is designed to guide governments and all recovery partners in preparing for and supporting mental health and wellbeing in the context of disasters. The Framework recognises the importance of integrating mental health considerations into preparation, relief and recovery planning and ensuring proactive outreach to first responders, volunteers and their families, before, during and after disasters.<sup>9</sup> The establishment of a Climate Army, or an adjacent dedicated capability, would require careful consideration of how to protect volunteer mental health and wellbeing, including factors identified by the Framework.

Volunteers also often play an important role in supporting disaster-impacted communities to manage the mental health and wellbeing impacts of disasters.<sup>10</sup> Psychological first aid, often delivered by volunteers, is the first level of care in the stepped care model for mental health planning.<sup>11</sup> Ensuring that volunteers are appropriately trained to deliver this kind of support is essential for community health, and in managing the social cohesion of communities post-disaster.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mao X, Fung OWM, Hu X, Loke AY. Psychological impacts of disaster on rescue workers: A review of the literature. *Int J Disaster Risk Reduct.* 2018;27:602–17.

<sup>8</sup> Beyond Blue (2018). Answering the call National Survey: Beyond Blue's National Mental Health and Wellbeing Study of Police and Emergency Services – Final Report, Police and Emergency Services Program - Beyond Blue.

<sup>9</sup> Australian Government, [National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework](#), 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

## Conclusion

Establishing a Climate Army that would bolster our capacity to respond to the immediate aftermath of natural disasters in Australia should be part of broader Australian Government action on climate change, adaptation and ongoing reforms and investment across the disaster management continuum, including the development of alternative Commonwealth capabilities for disaster response and recovery.

Incentivising and enhancing volunteer workforce measures may be able to contribute to improving social cohesion by providing a positive outlet for people to contribute to the community in its most trying times. Further, any initiative to increase volunteering rates in Australia should form part of a national approach and led by states and territories to declining volunteerism, such as that outlined in the National Strategy for Volunteering.

The Inquiry should consider how the proposed Climate Army would be integrated into other volunteer initiatives being developed or implemented by the Australian Government and/or state and territory governments targeted to address critical gaps in national capabilities to provide support during disasters that are more frequent, more intense, concurrent and can have catastrophic consequences. While incentives to increase the numbers of volunteers would enhance overall national workforce capacity and support reducing reliance on the ADF, such initiatives would also need to be undertaken in tandem with enhanced investments in the ability to coordinate, mobilise and deploy such capabilities and resources during disasters. Consideration would need to be given to how the 'climate army' would seek not to take away volunteers from organisations such as existing volunteer emergency service and support organisations because of the incentives offered under this proposal. The scheme should contribute to the enhancement of these existing volunteer organisations.