



28 February 2025  
Committee Secretary  
The Senate  
Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade References Committee

Dear Sir/Madam

**Submission to the Joint Standing Committee Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade References  
Committee Inquiry into the formation of a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade References Committee Inquiry into the formation of a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army). The inquiry provides a useful opportunity to consider the contemporary challenges associated with volunteering in Australia, and to consider the considerable progress that has been made in recent years to provide volunteer-based recovery support to natural disasters.

Disaster Relief Australia (DRA) is pleased to provide our response to the Terms of Reference (see Annex A). We believe that we are uniquely positioned to deliver the intent of the proposed Climate Army now and are actively seeking to expand our capabilities in a way which will provide further opportunities for all Australians, including young Australians, to provide volunteer support to their communities.

DRA was established in 2016 by veterans seeking to re-purpose their skills to help communities in times of natural disaster. Since then, DRA has become an established National asset, deploying 5,854 volunteers (including 2387 veterans and their family members) to over 200 community support and disaster recovery operations and developing strong relationships with NEMA and State and Territory disaster management agencies. With seven months of continuous operations in 2024 alone, DRA has unambiguously demonstrated that it can deliver persistent, integrated nationwide support across the preparedness, relief and recovery phases of the disaster management cycle to bring help and hope to communities on their worst day. It is the only organisation in Australia, outside of the ADF, that can do this.

Beyond its work in disaster relief and recovery, DRA makes a significant contribution to community disaster preparedness via its Big Map exercises, conducting 50 such activities since mid-2023, with at least 20 more planned for 2025. It is also working to increase national disaster resilience through its social enterprise, J2 Geospatial Intelligence Services (J2), which provides a range of disaster preparedness, relief and recovery professional services. J2 works with Government and industry clients to deliver tailored solutions, leveraging highly skilled specialists in disaster and all-hazards consulting,



planning, training and geospatial intelligence services. All profits from J2's work contributes to funding DRA 's charitable causes.

In 2023 DRA received a three-year, \$38.097 million Commonwealth grant to establish the Volunteer Uplift Program (VUP). The VUP is allowing DRA to significantly grow its volunteer workforce (up to 7500 by June 2026), create the infrastructure needed to persistently deploy volunteers nation-wide, build skills through specialised and nationally recognised training and create deployment-ready equipment pools across the Nation. It is also enabling DRA to make an increasingly significant contribution to veteran health and wellbeing. The VUP has provided the foundation for many of DRA's achievements since its commencement.

DRA recently finalised its 2030 strategy, which seeks to build on its achievements under the VUP commencing from July 2026. In January this year, DRA wrote to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition seeking a commitment in the lead up to this year's Federal election for Commonwealth funding of up to \$87.5 million over a four-year period to establish the comprehensive National Veteran Volunteer Program (NVVP) from July 2026. The NVVP forms the foundation of DRA's 2030 strategy.

The NVVP's key lines of effort are heavily focused on growing volunteer capacity by leveraging the foundation provided by the VUP and promoting greater emphasis on growing community preparedness and resilience. These themes are closely aligned to the desired aims of the Climate Army. Significantly, they clearly demonstrate that DRA is uniquely positioned to provide the Climate Army capability now, and without the need to create a new entity.

Through the proposed NVVP, DRA intends to undertake further targeted expansion to 10000 volunteers in total, with an increased emphasis on younger veterans, including female and indigenous veterans. These additional 2500 volunteers will be used to create 1250 two-person leadership and coordination teams that can leverage the skills gained by veterans whilst in service to lead the efforts of corporate, community and spontaneous volunteers in disaster relief and other community support activities. This approach removes an impediment to youth participation by ensuring the time of these volunteers is well used in targeted tasks that provide meaningful relief in times of disaster or contribute to enhanced community resilience to climate change related events through planned community support tasks i.e. clearing creek lines of fallen trees and rubbish or removing fire hazards.

This 'Resilience Volunteer' approach aligns very closely with the Climate Army concept. DRA can proactively team its volunteers with young Australian corporate and community volunteers in



undertaking preparedness and resilience activities in communities to better prepare for the types of disasters that those communities face. This methodology is currently being built into DRA's Preparedness framework, which will be implemented in the near term. This includes seeking partnerships with education institutions through our corporate partnerships program where DRA provides planning and coordination support to their corporate volunteer programs.

As a result of the substantial investment in DRA via the VUP, Australia now has a national asset that is positioned across the States and Territories and coordinated through a National Operations Centre and ten regionally based Disaster Relief and Recovery Teams. DRA's plans for growth are already targeting significantly expanded volunteer numbers. The creation of veteran based Small Leadership and Coordination cells provides an immediate pathway to better enable young Australians to volunteer to participate in climate change related community support activities that better prepare them for responding to disasters should they occur. In effect DRA is providing a Climate Army now and, through its planned NVVP, provides a pathway that is ready now to promote volunteering to young Australians.

Other organisations might have the capacity to deliver some of these capabilities. However, only DRA can deliver all of them in a comprehensive, integrated and disproportionately impactful way.

DRA would welcome the opportunity to discuss in more detail how it believes it can deliver upon the objectives of the Climate Army proposal to engage more young Australians in volunteering in support of their communities.

**Dave Smith AM, CSC, DSM**

Chief Executive Officer



Annex:

A. DRA Response to Joint Standing Committee Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade References  
Committee Terms of Reference

**DRA response to the Joint Standing Committee Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade References  
Committee Terms of Reference**

**a. Establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National  
Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army).**

**Response.** DRA currently has over 5000 volunteers and is on track to achieve 7500 volunteers through the Volunteer Uplift Program (VUP) by June 2026. DRA has proposed to Government to continue its service to the Australian Community by establishing the comprehensive National Veteran Volunteer Program (NVVP).

Through the proposed NVVP, DRA intends to undertake further targeted expansion to 10000 volunteers in total, with an increased emphasis on younger veterans, including female and indigenous veterans. This additional 2500 volunteers will be used to create up to 1250 two-person leadership and coordination teams that leverage the skills gained by veterans whilst in service to optimise the efforts of corporate, community and spontaneous volunteers in disaster relief and other community support activities. This approach removes an impediment to youth participation by ensuring the time of volunteers is well utilised in targeted tasks that provide meaningful outcomes in times of disaster or can contribute to enhanced community resilience to climate change related events through planned community support tasks i.e. clearing creek lines of fallen trees and rubbish or removing fire hazards. This 'Resilience Volunteer' approach aligns very closely with the Climate Army concept. DRA can proactively team its volunteers with young Australian corporate and communities volunteers undertaking preparedness and resilience activities in communities pre a disaster event. This approach is currently being built into DRA's Preparedness framework and planning which will be implemented in the near term.

DRA believes its 1250 leadership and coordination teams will be able to coordinate the efforts of up to 10 000 other volunteers, providing a very tangible mechanism to support substantial volunteer uplift, including participation by young Australians without the need for the creation of new entities.



DRA has an established network of ten regional Disaster Relief and Recovery Teams and a National Operation Centre capable of supporting multiple events across the nation should they occur. While many organisations can support state-based activities, DRA is arguably the only organisation outside of the ADF that can direct large numbers of personnel in a nationally coordinated manner. This ensures DRA is well positioned to support the intent of the proposed Climate Army and presents an established, mature structure to coordinate increased volunteering, including by young Australians.

**b. Exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture.**

**Response.** DRA's success is driven by its significant veteran workforce, which brings unique skills and experience that provides immediate benefit in better preparing communities to respond to disasters should they occur and providing recovery support in times of crisis. This also reduces the need for ADF involvement in disaster relief and recovery and improves community outcomes overall by speeding up recovery efforts and ensuring the restoration of community economic and social wellbeing as soon as possible.

One of DRA's primary engagement value proposition for volunteers is that serving with DRA enhances veterans' health, wellbeing and employment prospects. DRA's work aligns with recommendations from the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, particularly in providing veterans with continued service opportunities, purpose and identity, which have been shown to improve their wellbeing. These opportunities for camaraderie, meaningful service and continuing connection to community have proven to be the primary motivations for veterans to volunteer following their transition from Service. Similar motivations exist for our volunteers who have previous emergency services experience. The potential for young Australians to be exposed to personnel with broad experience and a sense of community mindedness presents significant value in terms of establishing role models and highlighting that community service and 'giving back' reinforces self-worth and their value to their community.

DRA enhances its engagement proposition through the provision of nationally recognised upskilling and training, which contributes to the competency sets of volunteers and enhances their employment opportunities. The exposure of DRA volunteers to their communities and to corporate volunteers through our partnerships program also grows awareness of their skills and increases the potential for discussions which may lead to employment opportunities.



The keys to successful volunteer engagement are minimising onboarding requirements (consistent with due diligence, health, and safety), optimising the opportunity for volunteers to undertake meaningful volunteering, and reducing non-discretionary administration and training to arguably a bare minimum. Regular engagement that instils a sense of value for their volunteering is also critical. Through its streamlined recruitment approach, work across the disaster preparedness, relief and recovery phases of the Disaster Management Cycle, focussed training and administration and broad national presence via its ten Disaster Relief and Recovery Teams (DRRTs), DRA readily meets all these requirements for volunteering success.

**c. Integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations.**

**Response:** DRA observes that 'young Australian' participation can be split into two categories: over 18s and under 18s. Over 18s are easily assimilated into most not-for-profit organisations. However, engagement with under 18s comes with significant additional governance requirements such as working with children checks and additional insurance (which is increasingly prohibitive for organisations reliant on grants and donations).

Considering this, DRA is taking a two-track approach to engagement. First, DRA already supports participation by young veterans and is actively looking to increase this via proposed NVVP. As DRA also has volunteers who are not Defence veterans, it is open to engagement with educational institutions to provide a volunteer pathway for young Australians over 18. DRA's national footprint ensures this opportunity could be offered in all states and territories.

Second, While DRA is growing its partnership program, there is an opportunity for DRA to establish partnerships with educational institutions to assist coordination of their student's community support activities such as 'clean up' or 'greening' events.

Finally, DRA is pursuing collaborative partnerships with organisations like Australian Red Cross who are better positioned to support under 18s to volunteer for preparedness, relief and recovery operations. Under such an arrangement, Australian Red Cross staff might provide direct leadership to volunteers while members of DRA's workforce, many of whom have deep experience in running disaster preparedness, relief and recovery operations, provide oversight, tasking and coordination. This has the added benefit of introducing under 18's to DRA and promoting it as a future volunteering pathway once they are over 18 years of age.



**d. Creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme that provides tangible benefits to volunteers and formally acknowledges their skills and contributions across sectors.**

**Response:** DRA is supportive of an approach that creates a nationally recognised qualifications scheme. Such a scheme would have direct benefits for DRA's veteran and volunteer community, increasing their recognised competencies and further improving their transition pathway and related employment opportunities.

DRA will expand its training opportunities under the NVVP and will seek to ensure the training it delivers informs development of a nationally recognised qualifications scheme. With a planned workforce of 10000 volunteers by 2030, the NVVP will represent one of the nation's largest volunteer schemes; a nationally recognised qualification scheme has much to offer DRA's volunteers.

**e. Investigating whether there are appropriate laws and safeguards to protect the health and safety of volunteers.**

**Response:** Consistent with para 3 above, DRA is of the view that existing workplace health and safety guidelines, together with laws and safeguards associated with working with young Australians under the age of 18, are sufficient to ensure the health

and safety of all volunteers. Volunteer based organisations already have significant compliance obligations and any increase in these would be to the detriment of trying to increase volunteering in general by increasing training burdens on volunteers and increasing the compliance, governance and reporting obligations of the organisation.

**f. The structure and governance of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army).**

**Response:** The creation of a discrete 'Climate Army' comes with significant costs in terms of time, organisation, personnel, resources and governance obligations. While it will add to a pool of organisations that can be called upon to respond to climate change related events, the creation of a separate Climate Army will add further competition for limited resources and create further complexity in relation to the coordination of support. Inevitably, upwards of 30% of funding allocated to agencies is consumed in establishment, administrative, and governance overheads rather than on direct operational outcomes.



DRA believes that its proposed NVVP, together with the existing DRA national structure and support network and its partnership programs, provides the necessary structure and governance arrangements to achieve the desired effects of a “Climate Army” in the very near future without the time, cost and resource burden associated with establishing a new discrete organisation.

Government, through the VUP, has made a significant investment in the DRA to generate a large, nationally run volunteer organisation with the associated leadership and coordination infrastructure and volunteer and logistical support framework. It makes sense to build on this success. The proposed NVVP both sustains the rate of effort achieved through the VUP and, with a modest annual increase in annual funding (from \$15.5m to \$21m pa from July 2026) substantially grows the capability to provide volunteer support to reduce the impacts of climate change, including a pathway to increase participation by young Australians. DRA believes such an approach substantially achieves the desired intent of the ‘Climate Army’ and provides the quickest and most assured pathway to delivering effective volunteer pathways.

**g. Comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices.**

**Response:** DRA supports comparisons with relevant overseas models and best practices.

**h. Any other related matters.**

**Response:** DRA is supportive of the intent of the ‘Climate Army’ and believes that the proposed NVVP provides a pathway to actively pursue the desired effects in a timely and cost-effective manner.