

Finance and Public Administration References Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Lessons to be learned in relation to the preparation and planning for, response to and recovery efforts following the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Use of moneys released from the Federal Government for intended services

Senator: Watt

Question reference number: 0001

Type of question: Hansard, page 25, 27 May 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 19 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator WATT: In some cases, the money has been released from the federal government to the relevant delivery agency—whether that be a state government, a local government or a charity—but we don't know how much of that money is actually being used to provide the services that it's intended for at this point.

Mr Colvin: I would be able to get that answer for you. It would be a large portion of that that would be in the community being used by organisations and individuals.

Answer:

The data provided to the committee (<https://www.bushfirerecovery.gov.au/progress-to-date/funding>) is the best estimate available of money provided to communities (including charities and local councils).

Reporting each time a payment is made would be an unreasonable reporting burden for charities and councils, diverting attention away from delivering services and support to those impacted by the bushfires. Instead, the Commonwealth requires funded organisations to report on program delivery, including expenditure, at relevant periods such as the end of a financial year or when a program ends.

In relation to Emergency Relief delivered through charities, contracts provide funding up-front to these providers, but for some of this funding, allows for expenditure through to 30 June 2021. This is in recognition that individuals will seek support at different times and ensures that support will remain available throughout the recovery journey.

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Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Briefing to the Prime Minister regarding the Queensland state of emergency

Senator: Rice

Question reference number: 0004

Type of question: Hansard, page 35, 27 May 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 19 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator RICE: How about prior to the Prime Minister going to Hawaii and the briefings? You said that PM&C provided regular advice to the Prime Minister throughout the bushfire crisis. Did you alert him when Queensland declared a state of emergency on 9 November?

Mr Gaetjens: I would check my personal involvement. I would have to take that on notice.

Senator RICE: If you can, and how you communicated it and what other information you provided about the fires.

Answer:

The Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Mr Phil Gaetjens, did not notify the Prime Minister or the Prime Minister's Office regarding Queensland's declaration of a state of emergency on the afternoon of 9 November 2019.

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Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Briefing the Prime Minister in relation to bushfires for period between 9 November and 15 December

Senator: Rice

Question reference number: 0005

Type of question: Hansard, page 35, 27 May 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 19 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator RICE: ... After that, 9 November, were there briefings provided to the Prime Minister directly, in person, or were they all through the Prime Minister's office between that period of 9 November and when he went to Hawaii on 15 December?

Mr Gaetjens: Again, I'll take it on notice for detail. During the time of the bushfires there was a mixture of written and oral briefings that were done from us, from EMA, from the Bureau of Meteorology. The Prime Minister wants to know a lot about these things. He would get briefings from experts. We'll take it on notice. I am pretty sure the rules are that we don't disclose the content of the briefing, but we can give you as much information as we can.

Senator RICE: If you could take that all on notice—and the type of briefing and who received those briefings.

Mr Gaetjens: Sorry—who received them?

Senator RICE: If they were going through his office, whether they were verbal briefings with people in his office rather than the Prime Minister directly.

Answer:

During the period of 9 November 2019 to 15 December 2019, the Prime Minister's Office received numerous briefings prepared by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), and Emergency Management Australia.

- The Director General Emergency Management Australia provided oral briefings to the Prime Minister on the status of the crisis.
- PM&C provided both oral and written briefings to the Prime Minister's Office.
- Emergency Management Australia provided written briefings to the Prime Minister's Office.

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Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Briefing the Prime Minister prior to his annual leave

Senator: Rice

Question reference number: 0006

Type of question: Hansard page 36–37, 27 May 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 19 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator RICE: What I want to go to is the briefing of the Prime Minister's office prior to that meeting on 17 December and the level of knowledge that the Prime Minister would have had before he left for his holidays on 15 December. It seems to me that what you're telling us is that he would have had considerable knowledge about how extreme the crisis was and what was unfolding, yet he still decided to go off on holidays on 15 December to Hawaii.

Ms Millar: We provide regular briefings through the EMA to the Prime Minister and his office, and throughout the entire fire season, as we do every year.

Senator RICE: Yes, but there was a gap in that meeting between the November and December ones. Take it on notice as to exactly what briefings were held. Thank you.

Answer:

Please refer to Question on Notice 0005.

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Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Queensland state of emergency declaration

Senator: Rice

Question reference number: 0008

Type of question: Written, 29 May 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 19 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

In relation to bushfire briefings:

a. Did the Department notify the Prime Minister or his office when Queensland declared a state of emergency on 9 November 2019?

Answer:

No.

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Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Decisions and rationale regarding the National Crisis Committee meeting held on 11 November 2019

Senator: Rice

Question reference number: 0009

Type of question: Written, 29 May 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 19 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Testimony from the Department indicates that a meeting of the National Crisis Committee was held on 11th November, alongside an Australian Government Crisis Committee meeting (with NCC brought forward from 13th November 2019).

- a. What was the rationale for bringing forward the NCC?
- b. Was the Prime Minister notified of the decision and the rationale?
- c. On what dates did PM&C provide information or advice from Emergency Management Australia to the Prime Minister or the Prime Minister's Office?

Answer:

- a. The Department of Home Affairs, in consultation with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), brought forward the National Crisis Committee (NCC) scheduled for 13 November to 11 November 2019 due to the severe fire weather.
- b. No. The Australian Government Crisis Committee (AGCC) and NCC meetings* are senior official-level meetings which may inform advice to the Prime Minister, Ministers and First Ministers.
- c. PM&C and Emergency Management Australia provided regular briefings during November, December and January.

***Note:**

- The AGCC comprises senior officials from Australian Government Departments and Agencies.
- The NCC comprises senior officials from Australian Government and state and territory government departments and agencies.