

## Submission

Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022



Tweed Shire Council would like to commend the Australian government in their response to the 2022 flood disaster in the Northern Rivers region of NSW. The proposed amendment displays initiative of the government to make change to allow for a more resilient regional Australia.

Tweed Shire Council has been significantly impacted by two separate 1% flood events over the past five years. To provide the Committee with context a brief background to the latest 2022 flood event is provided below;

*On 1 March 2022 an extraordinary weather event led to extensive rainfall across the Northern Rivers region and unprecedented flooding in the Tweed River. This event was the largest recorded flooding event in the Tweed's history.*

*Thousands of Tweed residences and commercial properties were inundated in the flood. Many businesses were severely damaged despite the existence of flood levees and other flood mitigation measures.*

*The 2022 flood surpassed all previous records in many parts of the Tweed. The Tweed River at Murwillumbah peaked at 6.5m which was 200mm higher than 2017. Murwillumbah narrowly escaped more widespread flooding as the levee only overtopped at a few locations and for a limited time.*

*The damage was particularly devastating to the South Murwillumbah industrial precinct, a location of many medium sized enterprises, employing hundreds of staff and contributing significantly to the local economy and to the social fabric of our town. Council conducted a survey of the impact of the flood on business. It is estimated from this survey that the responding businesses experienced losses in excess of \$58 million. The ongoing impact of the flood has become a major threat to jobs.*

In response to the proposed changes to disaster presented in Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022, Tweed Shire Council presents the following submission:

1. Council supports the allocation of \$200m per annum for Disaster Resilience and risk reduction. However, it is recommended that the amount should be significantly increased given the investment required in removing people and property from the flood plain.
2. Prefunding Councils to support them during and post disaster events. Tweed Shire Council estimates expenditure of over \$100m directly resulting from the March 2022 flood event. Due to the limitation in the scope of current grant funding arrangements, this will leave a funding shortfall of \$20m based on previous events.



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3. The mechanism for the disbursement of grant funds should be established and clearly enunciated in advance of any natural disaster, to allow grant recipients to plan for critical cash flow needs that will assist them through the recovery phase, is critical.
4. The grant funds should allow for greater autonomy for grant recipients to spend funds on necessary recovery items and services. This would enable greater focus on asset replacement rather than trying to fit the funds to arbitrary political focus areas and onerous administration on grant acquittal.
5. The grant should allow for greater focus on betterment funding to improve resilience for future events:
  - a. Things have improved for the March 2022 flood event but still not enough focus to provide real benefits into the future.
  - b. Guidelines should allow acquisition of assets if it is cheaper to do so than leasing. For example acquisition of temporary housing as opposed to Pod accommodation. These assets can be resold and funds provided back to the funding agency when the disaster response is complete. At present a lot of money is 'spent' as opposed to 'invested'.
  - c. Greater resilience planning and funding in between disasters would enable greater focus of funds as required immediately following the next event (and for instance might avoid reconstruction of obsolete infrastructure, housing, etc). For example, if more was done with Voluntary House Purchase planning then we could move faster and with more purpose after future events. A point in case Transport for NSW has just announced a program that will allocate funds based on improved "route contingency" rather fixing specific damages.
6. There should be more standardisation of grant application, reporting and acquittal. As a recipient of numerous state and federal recovery grants it is our experience that different agencies request data and provides responses in different formats. This creates excessive administrative burden on both councils and the agencies. Furthermore, there is opportunity to make best use of existing software. While this is currently a NSW issue, a requirement for national standardisation by the Federal government, perhaps attached to funding. This would provide direct efficiencies, would enable greater flexibility for specialist disaster workers who travel across the country, and would also provide a better baseline for analysis of disaster spend efficiencies and trends.