

Submission to the Senate Select Committee into Lessons to be Learned in Relation to the Australian Bushfire Season 2019-20

Submission from – John Mitchell, President, Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund

Background

The Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund (GERF) was formed on 6th December, 1978 following severe fires in the preceding two years. Initially, Australian Paper Mills (Maryvale) provided legal and administrative support to the fund and made an annual donation of \$5000 to keep the fund operating.

*The fund has operated continuously since 1978 collecting and distributing millions of dollars to members of the Gippsland community. Over 42 years up until 2019, GERF has provided emergency relief funding of more than \$6,000,000 to Gippslanders who have suffered loss to their principal place of residence as a result of bushfire, flood or storm event. **In the recent 2019/20 East Gippsland bushfires, more than \$9,000,000 has been distributed to residents in the East Gippsland Shire. A record \$7,900,000 was raised and GERF was also selected to distribute \$2,500,000 on behalf of the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Panel.***

Funds are raised by public appeal and donations from both the general public and corporate entities (many of whom operate in and around the Gippsland region).

*Apart from the legality of registration as a charity, and any statutory costs and audit fees there are **no** overhead expenses that are drawn from the fund and all proceeds of appeals are available for distribution to Gippsland residents impacted by an emergency event.*

*The fund is administered by a **volunteer** committee of management which includes representatives of all Gippsland Councils, industry, emergency service organisations and community members.*

Purpose

GERF has been established to provide immediate financial assistance to residents who suffer loss or hardship as a result of an emergency that occurs within the Gippsland Region or for those who may otherwise not be entitled to financial assistance from other sources.

Eligibility

People who have suffered loss or who are in necessitous circumstances as a result of bushfire, flood or other acts of nature that has affected their principal place of residence. In exceptional circumstances, a referral to the GERF Executive for assessment can be made (where extreme hardship may result from isolation or prevention from access to the family home), or impact on the family or individual is not/or will not be covered by any other means of financial support). Referrals are forwarded to GERF from the Municipal Recovery Manager of the local government authority in which the person resides.

John Mitchell has been President of the Fund for 20 years and has a background in leading a regional water authority and in leading a local government municipality.

This submission from GERF reflects the organisational experience of many bushfire events, with specific applicability to the recent 2020 bushfires on the Australian east coast.

(b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;

- In terms of **land use**, planning for designated high fire risk zones greater coordination and consultation should be undertaken between the relevant Australian, State and Local Government entities in respect to future land use zoning. The matters to be considered should include drought, climate change, building codes and setback, vegetation reduction, indigenous fire reduction practices in agreed on country locations as key case studies, property access, and proximity to National and State Parks/Native Forests.
- In terms of **existing settlements**, vegetation removal, building codes, and community infrastructure should be reviewed in what are regarded as potential high risk areas.

One observation made during and after the 2019/20 major bushfires is that the public discussion appeared to focus on a particular cause, e.g. vegetation removal, climate change, drought, or appropriate land use, and GERF considers this this approach focussing on “who is right” is rather futile. The reality is that all these issues impact depending on the local/regional circumstance and consequently all need to be considered in an integrated risk management approach.

- A further observation is the action to involve the **Australian Defence Forces (ADF)** was a good and timely decision, as this deployment greatly increased the response/recovery capacity, and enabled agencies to focus on functional specialisation roles. The ADF role in assisting to clear the Princes Highway and other local roads significantly accelerated the opening of these key public transport assets.
- There is a strong case to be made for **greater collaboration, sharing of data and information** between the various levels of Government and trusted partners. The sharing of data is necessary to effectively improve the response and then recovery efforts. Importantly, greater collaboration would improve understanding and avoid duplication of effort. The sharing of data could be effectively facilitated and managed with a formal Memorandum of Understanding.
- In respect to the 2019/20 Gippsland Fires, GERF was pleased to partner with the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Panel/Bendigo Adelaide Community Foundation and quickly distribute \$2.5M of the State Appeal Funds to Gippsland bushfire-impacted residents. This process facilitated the timely distribution of State Appeal Funds to residents and, of course, avoided duplication of effort; both these outcomes were greatly appreciated by the wider community. Again, greater effort needs to be made to utilise existing capacity in organisations like GERF.

(e) best practice funding models and policy measures to reduce future bushfire risk, both within Australia and internationally;

- GERF contend that best practice policy measures should include strong facilitation roles for both the response and recovery stages. For example, in the Gippsland bushfire event, GERF received many offers for donated labour, food, furniture, hay, clothes, vehicles, etc. In our opinion, not all these offers were able to be accepted in a timely manner due to the fact that key agencies, including the East Gippsland Shire Council, was understandably under resourced and overwhelmed. If a dedicated resource could have been quickly established to work with the East Gippsland Shire Council, Red Cross, Salvation Army, GERF and other on-the-ground charities such as Gippsland Farmer Relief, we believe that there was potential for many individuals/community groups to receive greater and more timely support.
- Furthermore, organisations like GERF (a trusted Gippsland entity for 42 years) should be supported by both the Australian and State Governments to increase its capability and capacity to respond to major events by developing its financial and customer relationship operational platform to ensure that a well proven and respected entity like GERF is relevant into the future, and is able to effectively engage in the 24/7 digital community environment.

(h) an examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government's response to those impacts;

GERF supports information being collected and reviewed to determine the physical and mental impacts of bushfires on the population. We know from past experience that the road to recovery for many takes several years, and it is, for some, an exhausting, challenging, and highly stressful process. There is a strong case for more resources to be provided to local residents and community groups to assist and support the recovery process.

Contact:

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