



The Honourable David Littleproud MP

Minister for Water Resources, Drought, Rural Finance, Natural Disaster and Emergency Management

Parliament House,

CANBERRA

28 November 2019

Dear Minister

My colleagues Lee Johnson, Michael Brown, Ewan Waller and I look forward to meeting with you next week to discuss our serious concerns about the risks to life, property and the environment presented by the current unprecedented bushfire conditions which are exacerbated by climate change. As previously advised, we would like to discuss the following:

1. A short and succinct overview of how bushfire danger has changed and the direct link to climate change, with particular reference to Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, and New South Wales;
2. Measures that the Federal Government can take immediately that will aid current firefighting and community protection efforts by the States and Territories;
3. Strategic interventions that the Federal Government can make to increase community resilience and support fire and emergency services to cope with a more dangerous environment longer term; and
4. Government action on climate change, which is a key driver of extreme weather and escalating fire and natural disaster risks.

The following points give you some more information in advance of our meeting regarding our suggestions for responses from the Federal Government:

1. **The Federal Government to take immediate measures to aid current firefighting and community protection efforts by the States and Territories.**

We are extremely concerned about the potential of an already unprecedented fire season, with hot, dry conditions across much of southern and eastern Australia resulting in significant losses and levels of risk. Already more than 600 homes and public buildings have been lost in NSW alone, mostly in remote and rural areas and small towns. It is only the beginning of summer, which means the hottest weather and greatest danger period may still be before us, with more heavily populated areas likely to be impacted. Immediate resourcing is required to save lives and protect property over the months ahead. The following interventions would make a material difference:

- An injection of emergency funding for the National Aerial Firefighting Centre (NAFC) to increase the number of *medium to large (5,000 - 15,000 litre) aerial firefighting assets* available for the duration of the 19/20 bushfire season, given that significant fires have already broken out in every state meaning that there will almost certainly be increasing competition and needs for scarce strategic resources. It is noted that a Business Case for increased budgetary support has been with the Government for some time, but not dealt with to date.
- Given that there has been relatively little *research conducted into the efficacy of large aerial firefighting assets*, the opportunity should be taken to conduct a structured evaluation of the use, effectiveness and costs of medium to large aerial firefighting resources, with a report and firm recommendations on Australia's future aerial firefighting needs and funding requirements to be delivered before the start of the next fire season. We submit that AFAC would need to be a key stakeholder.
- Provide assistance to NAFC, if required, to negotiate rapid lease or loan of additional medium to large firefighting aircraft from the northern hemisphere.
- Arrange for an urgent meeting of Emergency Management Australia, senior representatives of the Australian Defence Force, and AFAC (as a minimum) to develop a structured approach to defining *what, how, where and when the ADF can provide logistical and other support to firefighting and recovery operations* in the short term (this fire season). This should then form the basis of a larger review, post-bushfire season, of possible expanded civilian support roles for the ADF during natural disasters into the future, given that current DACC arrangements are essentially ad hoc in nature.
- Communicate clearly to the Australian public that the *nature of bushfire risk has escalated due to climate change*. In many parts of Australia, communities have not seen the scale or severity of conditions before. They need to understand this to ensure they respond appropriately to protect themselves.

2. Longer term, the Federal Government can make effective strategic interventions to increase community resilience and support fire and emergency services to cope with a more dangerous environment.

- *Fuel reduction burning* is being constrained by a shortage of resources in some states and territories and by a warming and drying weather cycle, which acting in concert reduce the number of days on which fuel reduction burning can be undertaken. Of all the factors which contribute to the intensity of a fire (temperature, wind speed, topography, fuel moisture and fuel load), only fuel load can be subject to modification by human effort. Fire is an essential ecological factor, which has an important and ongoing role in maintaining biodiversity and ecological processes in Australian forests and woodlands.
- As a key element in mitigating the effects of future fires, benchmarks need to be developed for *funding requirements* of fire, emergency and land management agencies by states and territories so that they can conduct increased, targeted fuel reduction works, and have operational capabilities (people, equipment, infrastructure) commensurate with increasing

risks and strategic fuel management requirements. A suitable reporting and auditing framework should be integral to this work.

- Provide *funding certainty* for an ongoing bushfire and natural hazards national *research capability* to ensure that Australia has the evidence and information required to adequately plan, prepare, respond to and recover from worsening conditions driven by climate change.
- Provide additional ongoing funding to the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) to properly resource a *climate change and severe weather unit* to provide vital early warning and intelligence for fire and emergency services.
- Provide additional ongoing funding for the BOM to further develop the suite of *Australian Community Climate and Earth-System Simulator* (ACCESS) programs that provide long-term weather prediction capabilities, and which enable fire and emergency services to better pre-plan for increasingly serious events.
- Provide funding for AFAC, BOM and the CSIRO to jointly develop *improved predictive capabilities* that can model bushfire, storm and flood impacts enabling pre-planning and alerts to communities.
- Provide funding to develop *enhanced models of community education and engagement* in order to increase resilience in a more dangerous environment.
- Provide funding to develop *enhanced national fire danger rating systems, standardised community warning tools, and emergency alerts*.
- Initiate a review of *Australian standards for building construction and town planning* that recognises the increasing intensity of bushfires in a warmer, drier climate, including the effect on flame, radiation, and ember attack zones.
- Require that development standards and construction levels, currently based on historical weather data, are instead based on objective data from bodies such as BOM and CSIRO on future weather extremes driven by climate change.
- Explore the concept that bushfire planning standards be changed to require *all populated areas to be automatically deemed as “bushfire prone”*, with local government having a reverse onus to the present arrangements; i.e. to provide evidence to fire services to justify *excising* identified areas from bushfire building and planning standards, rather than the current system which can result in lower standards than required to withstand the actual level of bushfire risk in a locality.
- Commence research into provision of community refuges (hardened infrastructure) that might double as community sporting facilities etc, able to provide protection for communities during floods, fires and storms (eg Portugal)

3. Government action on climate change, the key driver of worsening fire and extreme weather risks.

- ELCA members have observed with mounting concern the *escalation in extreme weather and natural disaster risks over recent decades*. Our observations are fully explained by empirical data and peer reviewed, irrefutable scientific findings. The increasing risk and changes are directly driven by a warming climate. To protect Australians from worsening bushfire conditions and natural disaster risks, Australia must *accelerate and increase measures to tackle the root cause, climate change*. More substantial national action is required to reduce Australia’s emissions quickly and deeply to protect future generations, to safeguard our economy, and to protect Australians from the escalating risks of extreme weather. Australia is a significant player worldwide. We are the 16th largest emitter of CO₂ out of more than 200 countries, and our per capita emissions are in the top 10 globally. When our exported fossil fuels are included - we would rank 5th in the world in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. This means we bear significant international responsibility in the global effort needed to mitigate the escalating climate driven risks.

- *We offer our expertise to brief the Government on the bushfire challenge.* In the first instance, we would welcome the opportunity to brief the National's Party room.
- The relevant department should prepare a *report on escalating fire and natural disaster risks over the next three decades*, including an accurate assessment of risks to communities across Australia. It should detail a) the long term budgetary and economic implications of experiencing and responding to worsening extreme weather; b) outline the preparedness required for communities, infrastructure, local government; health services and fire and emergency services; and c) determine the resources required to properly protect communities. The results should be publicised widely as this information is critical to ensure Australia is as prepared as it can be for worsening disaster risks.

I trust that this information will be helpful to you in preparation for the meeting.

Yours sincerely

(SIGNED)

Greg Mullins AO, AFSM

For Emergency Leaders for Climate Action