



Australian Red Cross submission on the National Emergency Declaration Act

February 2026



About us

Established in 1914 and by [Royal Charter](#) in 1941, Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. We have a unique humanitarian mandate to respond to disasters and emergencies. This partnership means governments can benefit from a trusted, credible, independent and non-political partner with local to global networks, who will work to implement humanitarian goals in a way that maintains the trust of government and Australian society.

Australian Red Cross is one of 191 Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – the world’s largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

The Movement is guided at all times and in all places by seven [Fundamental Principles](#): Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles sum up our ethics and the way we work, and they are at the core of our mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

We remain neutral, and don’t take sides, including in politics; enabling us to maintain the trust of all and to provide assistance in locations others are unable to go. Volunteering is in our DNA, and thousands of volunteers and members support us every day, helping solve social issues in their own communities. All our work is inspired and framed by the principle of Humanity: we seek always to act where there is humanitarian need.

Core areas of expertise for Australian Red Cross include Emergency Services, Migration, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Programs, Community Activities and Programs.

Highlights from our [2024-25 Annual Report](#):



18,200+
members and volunteers
acting for humanity



281,900+
Australians supported before,
during and after disasters

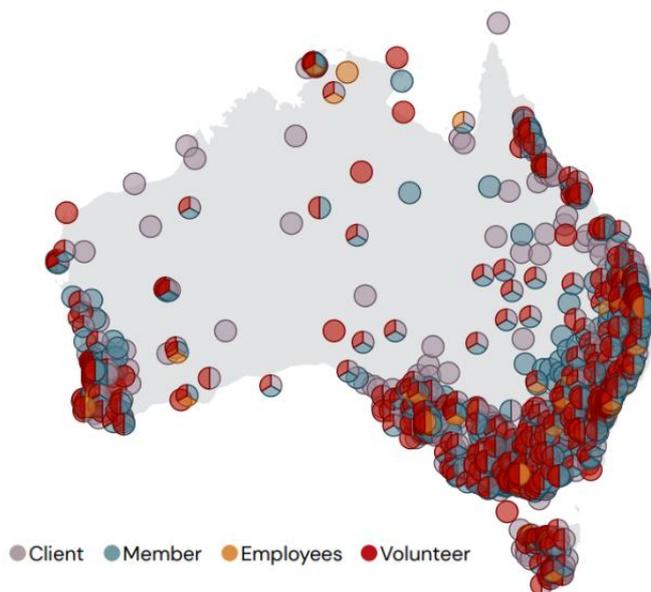


3.8 million+
people accessed information
from disaster preparedness
campaigns



34,100+
people from 129 countries
supported through migration
programs

Location of Australian Red Cross people and clients





Purpose

The Australian Government is seeking feedback on the implementation and operation of the National Emergency Declaration Act (NEDA), as referred to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee for inquiry.

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to provide our input to this inquiry. Our submission draws on evidence from subject matter experts and emergency response programs across the organisation, to ensure a comprehensive humanitarian perspective is highlighted for the committee.

Summary of recommendations

Australian Red Cross recommends that the Australian Government:

Recommendation 1: Revise the threshold and broaden the definition to enable emergency declarations to be triggered more readily and with fewer restrictive criteria.

Recommendation 2: Include consideration of cumulative and compounding impacts of disasters as a trigger for declaration of a national emergency.

Recommendation 3: Invest in long-term recovery to ensure communities have their needs met and to help mitigate the ongoing and escalating cost and impact of disasters.

Recommendation 4: Improve transparency in declaration decisions and establish a National Emergency Advisory Panel to provide independent advice, facilitate real-time national coordination, and deliver accurate information to decision-makers.



Introduction

Since its enactment in 2020, the National Emergency Declaration Act (NEDA) has been in place to provide a framework for Commonwealth mobilisation during emergencies that cause nationally significant harm. This is a critical function, as Australia's disaster landscape continues to worsen. Australian Red Cross alone has been activated at an increasing rate over the last 10-15 years. This trend is driven by a confluence of influences including a changing climate, urbanisation, global tensions and many other forces. Regardless of what drives the trend however, the need for transparent, accountable and decisive emergency declaration frameworks and mechanisms is evident.

The National Climate Risk Assessment has shown that Australia will increasingly face compounding, cascading and concurrent hazards that will significantly impact key national domains including health, primary industries, ecosystems, critical infrastructure and communities. These risks will place strain on systems already struggling under current demand but stand to benefit from reforms to the NEDA that facilitate earlier and more clear national coordination of events.

This Australian Red Cross submission proposes targeted amendments to the NEDA that would allow Commonwealth coordination to deliver substantial, nation-wide benefits. These include lowering of declaration thresholds, recognition of cumulative, compounding and concurrent emergencies, integration of psychosocial support (PSS) information and improved transparency through an independent advisory mechanism. These proposed changes are consistent with the Act's intention to define the Commonwealth's role in preparing for, responding to and recovering from nationally significant harm.

Recommendation 1

Revise the threshold and broaden the definition to enable emergency declarations to be triggered more readily and with fewer restrictive criteria.

Thresholds

The NEDA enables national emergency declarations where an emergency has occurred or is likely to occur, is causing nationally significant harm, and where the nature and severity justify a declaration in the interests of emergency management. The declaration may be made even when events occur outside Australia, provided the harm in Australia is nationally significant. The Act defines nationally significant harm to include harm to life or health (including mental health), animals, plants, property, environment or disruption to essential services.

However, despite this broad definition of ‘nationally significant,’ there have been limited instances over the last six years wherein the declaration has been utilised. This should be something to be celebrated, but unfortunately, it demonstrates a miscalibration of the Act, given that the last six years have seen numerous significant events impact the country, during which people and communities would have benefited from the early declaration of national emergency.

Australian Red Cross has extensive experience in dealing with crisis and disruptions of all types, including natural hazards (fires, floods, storms, cyclones), collective trauma events (like the 2025 Bondi attack), health emergencies (such as COVID-19), protracted disasters (such as drought) and human causes crises (such as armed conflict, mass migration and terrorism). One thing that unnecessarily intensifies the impact of any crisis is lack of attention, which leaves impacted communities feeling forgotten and alone, compounding the existing psychosocial damage (Australian Journal of Emergency Management, 2023).

An early, accurate declaration of an emergency demonstrates to impacted communities that the suffering they are experiencing is visible, and that the scale of the crisis is understood. This in itself can reduce the psychosocial impact of disasters but critically, it can also help enhance trust in public authorities and combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation (University of Melbourne, 2024).

While publicly declaring an event to be an emergency does not inherently dissipate its impact, it can help people feel seen and understood, bolstering their ability to bear up under challenging circumstances and can also trigger critical financial and psychosocial supports being made available to communities when they need it most. For example, early and adequate psychosocial support for people based on their needs, as well as for the staff and volunteers who provide mental health, psychosocial and practical support, can prevent distress and suffering from developing into severe mental health conditions (World Health Organization, 2024).

In the last six years, several events have caused harm to people and communities at such a significant scale that it could have been considered nationally significant:

- Tropical Cyclone Alfred 2025
- Bondi Beach Attack in 2025
- South Australian Algal bloom (ongoing)
- 2025 and 2026 Heatwaves
- Western New South Wales Power Outage in 2024
- Northern Territory Big Rivers Monsoon
- New South Wales Storms and Floods April and June 2024



The scale and scope of many of these events reverberates far beyond the directly impacted communities. There are financial implications (people who do business with those in impacted regions, causing supply issues). People have friends and family all over the country, and will be personally impacted by disasters, when the people they know and love are impacted (including stress, fear about wellbeing and loss of life and other concerns). Tourism and travel are other areas that show how connected we are and how when one region suffers, others do as well. The algal bloom in South Australia gives an example of how a protracted environmental disaster has a chilling effect on tourism and travel well beyond the impacted region, to the entire state and beyond. Reduction of food supply and other necessities can also escalate the scale and impact of disasters.

But beyond these very clear examples, it is *important* that people in Darwin feel empathy when people in Wagga Wagga are impacted by a bushfire. It is *important* that people in CBD Melbourne notice and care when Townsville is struck by a cyclone. As a country, Australia needs to be able to mobilise material aid, financial relief, media attention, and to demonstrate care as we face future disasters. A national sense of 'standing together' and supporting one another will ensure we are more resilient to future emergencies and disasters. To do that, we need to be able to recognise the complexity and interconnections that tie us all to one another. It is worth noting that community needs assessments are a critical tool to help governments and sector agencies understand the impact and scale of a disaster.

Ultimately, the current definitions mean that declarations are so limited, geographically bounded, economically focused, and fail to capture the breadth of social, health, and interjurisdictional impacts that disasters inflict on people well outside the 'impacted area'.

Recommendation 2

Include consideration of cumulative and compounding impacts of disasters as a trigger for declaration of a national emergency.

Recommendation 3

Invest in long-term recovery to ensure communities have their needs and to help mitigate the ongoing and escalating cost and impact of disasters.

Cumulative and long-term impacts on communities

Australia's disaster risk landscape is no longer defined by isolated, short-term events. Instead, communities are increasingly exposed to cascading, compounding and concurrent hazards that interact across time and geography. The release of the National Climate Risk Assessment underscored this shift, demonstrating that climate driven hazards are intensifying in both frequency and severity, with wide ranging impacts on essential services, economic systems, community wellbeing, and critical infrastructure. These realities highlight a significant disconnect between how disasters unfold in practice and the way they are currently treated under the National Emergency Declaration Act, given hazards are intensifying in both frequency and severity, with wide ranging impacts on essential services, economic systems, community wellbeing, and critical infrastructure.

Cascading disasters are defined as 'extreme events, in which cascading effects increase in progression over time and generate unexpected secondary events of strong impact.

Compounding disasters are defined as the combination of two or more extreme events, which occur simultaneously or successively and have substantial effects together.

[Leppold et al. 2025.](#)

These impacts are not being felt evenly across the country. People already experiencing systematic exclusion and marginalisation are particularly impacted. Indigenous communities, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, people in rural and remote areas, people with disability as well as people who are LGBTIQ+ and people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, homelessness or housing instability are some of the groups facing heightened risks. These risks are compounded in the context of disasters, where structural inequities can amplify exposure to trauma, isolation, and barriers to accessing support. However, it is also imperative to recognise the strengths in communities, rather than taking a deficit-based approach, as well as acknowledging the unconscious biases at play in policy, procedure and practice.

The Act's current framing presumes that disasters are discrete, time limited events. This approach fails to limited events. This approach fails to acknowledge the cumulative erosion of community resilience when shocks and hazards occur in sequence or overlap. Research has shown that the impacts of major disasters can persist for many years, and in some cases, individuals continue to experience significant mental health challenges more than a decade after the original event ([University of Melbourne, 2021](#)).

The lived experience across Australia is increasingly one in which the recovery from one crisis is interrupted by the onset of another. Treating each event as a standalone incident obscures this reality and limits the ability of national mechanisms to recognise when aggregate harm has reached a level that truly is nationally significant.



Communities already face a long and complex recovery trajectory following any major event, and this is further complicated when disasters occur consecutively. Psychosocial impacts accumulate over time, placing strain on children, adults, families and entire communities. While many people can recover with the right supports, the absence of the right supports increases the risk that distress hardens into long term harm. This is further complicated when communities are impacted by events that are not considered 'disasters,' such as drought, heatwave or events such as the algal bloom. In these cases, the psychosocial harm can be profound. For example, an ANU study into the impact of drought on mental health in rural and regional Australia showed higher rates of mental health problems for those in affected areas, and unsurprisingly, that the more severe the agricultural impacts, the greater the negative impact on mental health ([ANU, 2014](#)).

Recovery is rarely linear; people progress at different speeds, with some requiring sustained support for years rather than weeks. These long-term effects are often misunderstood or overlooked, resulting in a lack of prioritisation of psychosocial wellbeing within emergency management frameworks and resourcing. Despite these realities, funding and support mechanisms remain heavily weighted toward immediate response phases and short-term programs. This approach does not reflect how communities actually navigate recovery, nor does it account for the trust-building, access, consistency and time required for recovery programs to be effective.

Single-hazard funding also poses a significant challenge, as people experiencing drought, floods, heatwaves, pandemic or collective trauma events often experience them simultaneously or in close succession. When assistance is only available for one hazard at a time, communities face unnecessary barriers to support and gaps that can compound their stress and vulnerability.

The cumulative, multi-hazard nature of modern disasters means that localised events can produce nationally significant consequences. These may include disruptions to supply chains, population displacement, impacts on health systems, declining productivity, and national-scale psychosocial strain. The experience of communities across Australia demonstrates that even when the physical impact of a disaster is geographically bounded, its economic and social effects extend far beyond the immediate area. As disasters become more frequent and interconnected, the narrow and event-based definition of "nationally significant harm" becomes increasingly incompatible with the actual risk landscape.

For the National Emergency Declaration Act to remain fit for purpose, it must evolve to better reflect these interconnected realities. Future updates to the Act should explicitly recognise cumulative, compounding and concurrent disasters, and provide mechanisms that allow declarations to be made based not solely on the severity of a singular event, but on the totality of impacts over time. Such changes would ensure that the Commonwealth can coordinate support earlier and more effectively, mobilise multi-year recovery efforts where needed, and embed psychosocial wellbeing as a fundamental consideration in emergency decision-making.

Strengthening the Act in this way would ensure that communities are supported not only through the immediate crisis, but across the full arc of recovery and into future preparedness, ultimately reducing long-term harm and reinforcing national resilience.

Recommendation 4

Improve transparency in declaration decisions and establish a National Emergency Advisory Panel to provide independent advice, facilitate real-time national coordination, and deliver accurate information to decision-makers.

Improving transparency and coordination

Although most Australians are unlikely to engage with the NEDA in their daily lives, the decisions enabled by this legislation have significant implications for community safety and wellbeing. Clear, timely, and transparent decision-making is critical to maintaining public trust, particularly during periods of crisis, when uncertainty is high and people rely on authoritative information to guide their actions and expectations.

When a disaster occurs, the decision to declare or not declare a national emergency must be grounded in a holistic understanding of impacts, including social, economic, environmental and psychosocial dimensions. Ensuring that this decision-making process is consistent, evidence-based and communicated with clarity is essential for public confidence and will facilitate a fast and just recovery. Greater transparency around the criteria used, the assessment undertaken, and the rationale for decisions, especially when the decision is taken to *not* declare a national emergency, would support accountability and enhance community trust in government processes.

To strengthen the integrity and effectiveness of the national decision-making framework, Australian Red Cross recommends the establishment of a National Emergency Advisory Panel. Such a panel would provide independent, expert advice on the actual and anticipated impacts of disasters, enabling real-time national coordination and informed decision-making. An advisory panel should include organisations with deep experience in responding to and recovering from crises, including those with strong community presence, operational capability, and subject-matter expertise.

Australian Red Cross is uniquely positioned to contribute to such a mechanism. Our role as auxiliary to government and ability to highlight the voice of community as well as our trusted brand as a national convener in the NGO sector position us well to advise the highest decision-making bodies in the emergencies and disasters sector. As a neutral, independent, and trusted organisation with extensive networks across Australia, we are often among the first to observe emerging needs, community sentiment, early psychosocial impacts, and the real time consequences of escalating events. Our ability to deliver timely, accurate, community centred information to decisionmakers can help ensure that declarations reflect lived realities on the ground. Moreover, our presence on an advisory panel would enhance the quality of insights available to government, particularly regarding the psychosocial consequences of disasters, the needs of vulnerable populations, and the cumulative impacts of successive events.

The importance of such expertise is amplified by the growing risks posed by misinformation and disinformation during emergencies. Disasters create conditions in which false or misleading information spreads rapidly, often exacerbated by heightened emotions, information gaps, and fragmented communication channels. Mis and disinformation can undermine public safety by eroding trust in authorities, discouraging people from following official advice, amplifying fear and confusion, and weakening the social cohesion necessary for effective recovery. It can also impede response efforts by diverting attention and resources, spreading inaccurate assessments of risk, or facilitating the circulation of harmful narratives that target already vulnerable communities.



Trusted humanitarian organisations such as Australian Red Cross play a critical role in countering these risks. Our reputation for neutrality and independence enables us to reach communities that may be less trusting of government sources. We can help ensure that accurate, evidence-based information is disseminated quickly and that emerging misinformation trends are identified early.

Strengthening transparency, improving the clarity of decision-making processes, and embedding independent, trusted expertise within national governance arrangements will collectively enhance public confidence, support more effective disaster management, and ensure that decisions taken under the NEDA are both well-informed and broadly understood.

Conclusion

This submission has highlighted the growing gap between the legislative threshold for declaring a national emergency and the reality of how disasters now unfold. While the Act has remained largely dormant, communities and frontline services have not. Localised events can have nationally significant social, economic, and psychosocial impacts, particularly when disasters are cumulative or concurrent.

Ultimately, the current definition of nationally significant harm is overly event-based, geographically bounded, and economically focused, failing to capture social, health, and interjurisdictional impacts.

This submission argues that while NEDA remains a vital framework, it requires recalibration to better reflect contemporary disaster risk and lived experience, including lower thresholds, recognition of cumulative impacts, greater transparency, and explicit consideration of mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.