

**TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

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**IN THE MATTER OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO  
NATIONAL NATURAL DISASTER ARRANGEMENTS**

**DAY 21 TRANSCRIPT**

Continued from Thursday, 9 July 2020, DAY 20

**CANBERRA**

**10:00 AM, FRIDAY, 10 JULY 2020**

**MS D HOGAN-DORAN SC and MS K DOVEY, appear as Counsel Assisting**

**<RESUMING 10:02 AM>**

MS DOVEY: Good morning, Chair, Commissioners.

5 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Good morning, how are you?

MS DOVEY: Very well. First up this morning we have evidence from two more  
community witnesses. We're going to hear from Jenny and Arthur Robb, small  
business people from Kiah, about 12 kilometres from Eden in New South Wales. In  
10 early January the fires came through their property. Their house survived but the  
property burnt and they lost all their sheds. Tourism is a key part of the local  
economy in that area and they will talk about the effect on their local community of  
the loss of tourism as well as their personal experience in seeking support to recover  
from the damage that they suffered.

15 One thing that you might notice is referred to in their evidence is that a large  
proportion of their business comes from Victoria; and we know that in recent days  
that border has been closed and so that will be an additional effect on the people  
around Kiah and Eden and in southern New South Wales generally that won't be  
20 included in their evidence but is something that is worth taking into account. Their  
evidence was taken by video on their property in Kiah in New South Wales on 11  
June by me, by a video link. The evidence has been edited. The original footage of  
the Robbs' evidence is also available. I would ask that we play the video that runs for  
about 30 minutes and following which we will hear from the State of Victoria.

25

**<VIDEO PLAYED>**

**<ARTHUR ROBB, AFFIRMED>**

30 **<JENNIFER ROBB, AFFIRMED>**

MS DOVEY: Thank you. Now, thank you for speaking with us this morning. Jenny  
and Arthur, could you please each give us your name and tell us your occupation?

35

MS JENNY ROBB: Jenny Robb, tour operator.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: And Arthur Donald Robb, I used to be a concreter,

40 **<VIDEO INTERRUPTED>**

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Commissioners, I understand it's not being broadcast.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. Let's hold it, and start it again, please.

45 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Yes, I understand that the server has crashed and there  
may not be any live broadcasting of the proceedings.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Let's clarify that too then.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Can we adjourn for 10 minutes?

5 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. Let's adjourn until 10.15.

**<ADJOURNED 10:05 AM>**

**<RESUMING 10:30 AM>**

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COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Ms Dovey, we resolved the issue of getting the information out to the public. We will put the community witness video on hold. We will look to do that again later on in the day and, once we've got that timing, we will make sure people know.

15

MS DOVEY: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: But please proceed.

20 MS DOVEY: Ms Hogan-Doran is going to .....

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Ms Hogan-Doran, sorry.

25 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: That's all right. Commissioners, Chair, we will now have the witness from Bushfire Recovery Victoria. I call Mr Lee Miezis.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Mr Miezis, good morning.

30 MR MIEZIS: Good morning.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Mr Miezis will affirm.

**<LEE MIEZIS, AFFIRMED>**

35 **<EXAMINATION BY MS HOGAN-DORAN SC>**

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Mr Miezis, I will have the Commissioners taken to the State of Victoria's response to the notice to give, which is EMV.0015.0001.0001 and at page 2 and paragraph 4. It's noted there that:

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*"Recovery is led by Local Governments where they have capacity to coordinate relief and recovery. The scale of this event exceeded the capacity of individual Local Governments and impacted on multiple regions within the State. This meant that recovery was best coordinated at a State level. Accordingly, the government announced the creation of BRV."*

45

That is Bushfire Recovery Victoria. You're the CEO of that organisation?

MR MIEZIS: That's correct.

5 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Was there any recovery agency or any agency with responsibility for recovery activities prior to the establishment of BRV?

10 MR MIEZIS: So there's - the responsibility for coordination of recovery prior to the establishment of Bushfire Recovery Victoria at the State level sat with Emergency Management Victoria and the Emergency Management Commissioner, and at the regional level with the Department of Health and Human Services. Each department, so Victorian Government department, did have particular roles and responsibilities but at that coordination level it sat with Emergency Management Victoria and Health and Human Services.

15 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: And is it now right that the whole of the coordination of the recovery effort sits with BRV?

20 MR MIEZIS: That - that's correct. So Bushfire Recovery Victoria has responsibility for coordination at the State level and at working with Local Government in coordinating activities at that municipal or regional level.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Did BRV have responsibility for immediate relief?

25 MR MIEZIS: No. We were established on 6 January, and a number of those immediate relief activities were well and truly underway, and being delivered by the relevant agencies. So, being a new agency, we were very conscious about not disrupting that delivery of services to community, and so the responsibility for relief remained with those existing organisations and we started to focus on the recovery effort itself.

30 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: In paragraph 4.1 it speaks here to coordinating the recovery from the 2019-2020 bushfires, and in the second dot point it identifies providing financial support to Local Councils. To what extent does BRV have any responsibility for the financial assistance and the administration of the funding and financial assistance schemes?

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. I think the live stream has --

40 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Gone again.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: -- died again, but if the parties still have access to this, we will continue. Let's just hold off and just confirm all that for a second.

45 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Mr Miezis, we've just had a disruption in the broadcast of the live stream. We're just pausing for a moment. I won't ask you any more questions until we determine what we're doing next.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Sorry, Mr Miezis.

MR MIEZIS: Thank you.

5 MR ATTIWILL QC: It's Richard Attiwill here from the State of Victoria, just confirming that I have accessed the live stream.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. Thank you for that; appreciate you telling us.

10 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I think that suggests that Mr Attiwill, because he is within the same video conference, is able to essentially be within hearing room. And I just confirm the live transcript is still transcribing and that's available to all parties with leave.

15 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: We will just confirm all that, and make sure everything is in place as a minimum requirement, and then we will look to continue. That's a question - it's being recorded so it then can be put up not as a live stream but it can be streamed on the web page, so people can still see it, not as a live.

20 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I will make an inquiry as to that because the method has been that the stream from the hearing room is being recorded.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: That answers that question.

25 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I think it was suggested it wasn't recorded to that point.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: It's not recorded to that point but if it does record from there --

30 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: We would have a visual record.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes, go on.

35 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: So, Chair, the position is that parties with leave have access to the live stream and an audio feed. That's all parties with leave, as I understand, all parties with leave.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: All parties with leave have access to the live stream.

40 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: The live transcript.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Transcript yes.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: And audio feed.

45 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: And audio feed.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: The representatives from the State of Victoria should be video conferenced in and we heard from Mr Attiwill, counsel from Victoria, with the witness. What is now being established is a recording of the examination. It will be in a position to be uploaded to the website at a point later today. Obviously, we do not propose that there be any attempt to live broadcast because of the concern as to public interest immunity or putting it up without there having been some review --

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes.

10 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: -- before that exercise is taken.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. So we will continue with Victoria and at the end of this one we will take a short adjournment. We will look at how we are technically for the rest of the day. But we will continue with Victoria at this stage. Sorry. And just, a good point from Commissioner Bennett, just make sure there's no objection from Victoria in continuing in that way. Are you happy to continue under those conditions?

MR ATTIWILL QC: Chair, could I just go and obtain instructions; I would only need a few moments?

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay, and we will give you a few moments at the end. So that's okay. Is that what you --

25 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: No, he's asking for it now.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: He is asking for it now, to check.

MR ATTIWILL QC: Just quickly now, Chair.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay, no, please. We will take a 60 second pause while you do that just to confirm, and then we will continue.

MR ATTIWILL QC: Thank you. Thank you. Commissioners, Richard Attiwill here.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes, Richard.

MR ATTIWILL QC: We confirm, Chair, we are happy for it to proceed, just on the understanding that obviously it is being recorded and can be available publicly later on.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. Thank you. And that is confirmed.

MR ATTIWILL QC: Yes, that is.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes.

MR ATTIWILL QC: No, thank you, Chair.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Thank you. We will continue with Victoria. When we adjourn after this we will make an assessment of the technical situation and then we  
5 will make an assessment of how we go for the rest of the day; okay?

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Yes, Chair, and I am informed by the technical team that it is being recorded.

10 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Thank you. That's good.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Mr Miezis thank you for your patience. I'm not sure to what extent you heard or can recall so I'm going to repeat the question I asked you before we were interrupted. In paragraph 4.1 it speaks here to coordinating the  
15 recovery from the 2019-2020 bushfires, and in the second dot point it speaks to providing financial support to Local Councils. To what extent does BRV have any responsibility for financial assistance and the administration of the funding and financial assistance scheme?

20 MR MIEZIS: So, in terms of Local Councils and the provision of financial support for capability and capacity building, Bushfire Recovery Victoria worked very closely with Local Government Victoria and the Councils themselves in providing that funding. So the funding agreement for capability and capacity for recovery is between Bushfire Recovery Victoria and the Local Governments themselves.

25 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. And what about in terms of dealing with funding arrangements with the Commonwealth? Is that BRV leading that or is it EMV?

30 MR MIEZIS: It's a combination, and I think just as a function of our newness as an organisation and established processes within both the Commonwealth and the State. So, whilst we have a role in negotiating and working with the Commonwealth and Local Government on what some of those programs might look like, the administration of that funding remains with Emergency Management Victoria.

35 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: And how large is BRV?

MR MIEZIS: At the moment we are about 94 FTE. So that comprises a small core team that is Melbourne based, and two regional teams. So we worked very quickly to  
40 establish a presence regionally in bushfire affected communities which includes both a regional management structure but also staffing in community recovery hubs.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. The State of Victoria has experienced a surge in coronavirus infections with increased public health restrictions imposed and  
45 closure of the State borders. How will this affect those Victorians who are still recovering from the bushfires?

MR MIEZIS: As an organisation, I guess 75 per cent of our time in existence has been during the global pandemic and the restrictions that have been in place. So we have certainly had to adjust how we deliver those programs, but we've been very focused on the fact that the need for that support does not diminish. In fact, you  
5 know, when you think about it, it's sort of one disaster on top of another for many people and many businesses.

10 So we've adjusted how we have delivered services. For example, in community recovery hubs which would normally be a walk-in service, a lot of that access to those supports has been shifted to an online where the hubs either become a digital kiosk or have appointment-only access to services, or with community recovery committees where we can't do the traditional town hall meetings for people to come together to talk about those priorities, we've made sure that we can do that online.

15 We've had to put additional restraints in around the clean-up program, particularly around the movement of crews but we have not in any way loaded up that program. It has just been a way how we've had to change the operating model to comply with restrictions to make sure that those critical and important services continue to get delivered to those in need.

20

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: And what about the likely impact on some of the sectors that were particularly affected by the bushfires? We might go to page 21 of the State's response and paragraph 119:

25 *"The economic impacts were particularly concentrated in the industry sectors of tourism, retail, agriculture and forestry."*

And in paragraph 119.2:

30 *"The impacted regions experienced a decline of 35 to 85 per cent in gross - "*

GVA stands for?

35 MR MIEZIS: Gross value added.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Thank you:

40 *"In tourism industries over the January to March 2020 period and also small businesses reduced by visitation and expenditure."*

45 Have you made any assessment or projections in relation to how those regions will be impacted by way of their tourist industries and their small business industries now that the restrictions have ramped up again?

MR MIEZIS: So we continue to work really closely with the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions here in Victoria who was really leading the economic recovery, both from bushfire itself but also from the COVID-19 pandemic. So that

work would be, and is being, undertaken by Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions. We stay close to them, and take a very pragmatic approach. If I use the example of a small business that may have had a revenue impact, it's very difficult to attribute, you know, what proportion of that revenue impact has been as a direct  
5 result of a bushfire versus, you know, the pandemic or the restrictions caused by that pandemic.

So we're very pragmatic; we stay very close to those that are working on the response to the pandemic to make sure that we're not only factoring that in but we are  
10 making supports as simple and as seamless to those in need.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: You spoke about the difficulties of attribution, attributing the cause of the economic impact being the bushfires and/or the impact of COVID-19. Has there been any proposal to merge the recovery effort?  
15

MR MIEZIS: Look, I think in a practical way that is happening. So, I mentioned before, for example, economic recovery in Victoria is led by the Department of Jobs, Precinct and Regions. Now it is also leading the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. So, in a practical sense, it's the same people working on the  
20 delivery of programs. We are constantly, as I said, having conversations with the department to make sure that, again, we're taking a practical view of how the supports are delivered.

But we are still, you know, we are conscious that - that the bushfires have had a particular impact on those communities. Those impacts have been amplified or, you know, almost a double whammy of COVID-19. So there is still that particular need and focus for those that are recovering from bushfire, but the COVID-19 does not replace that. And it's important that those communities know that, you know, they're not being forgotten.  
25

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I will just take you, you mentioned that there had been some impact on the recovery and clean-up processes because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Can we go to the State Recovery Report issued on 19 June 2020? That's EMV.001.150001.0059 and page 63 which is the clean-up status. I've got a couple of  
30 questions on this document but if we can go over to 63, see the clean-up status --  
35

MR MIEZIS: Yes.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: -- pictures or diagrams. It says:  
40

*"There were 412 clean-ups completed as at 12 June."*

Which is up 118 from the last State recovery report:

45 *"62 per cent of clean-ups commenced of the 730 properties requiring clean-up as at 12 June."*

Just so I understand how this works, the 412 clean-ups are the ones that are done; and the 730 are the ones that still require clean-up and of that 730, 454 have commenced but the balance have not commenced. Is that right?

5 MR MIEZIS: So the 730 is the total number of properties that have registered for clean-up.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right.

10 MR MIEZIS: Of that 730, 412 have been completed as at this stage, and 454 had commenced - sorry, 412 is a subset of 454 which is a subset of 730.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I see. So 412 is a subset of 454: are you sure about that?

15 MR MIEZIS: Yes.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: So that suggests that there's about 42 left to complete?

20 MR MIEZIS: No. It suggests that there's about 42 that are currently being cleaned up at the time that this report was prepared.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I see. Of that 730 properties requiring clean-up, you've said these are the properties that have registered. Do you have a sense of how many have not registered?

25 MR MIEZIS: No. We had - if I think about the initial registrations that we received, it was about 936. Now, when we went through those, there was a number of duplications. Some people withdrew from the program. But the other point I would make here is 730, as of yesterday, now 745, because whilst we had some people  
30 withdraw or, you know, remove because of duplications, there are still people now registering and were registering for the program right up until, sort of, the close of date of 30 June.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I see. It says elsewhere in the response:

35 *"The clean-up is progressing and is on track for expected completion by 31 August."*

Is that end August time line likely to hold, what with the new COVID restrictions?

40 MR MIEZIS: Yes, it is, absolutely. As I said, we have not slowed up at all as a result of COVID. We have had to put restrictions in place. And, for example, we've divided the bushfire affected area into 12 zones, and we've made sure that, you know, those zones are managed independently and there's not a lot of crossover. We've also made sure that - and we knew communities were concerned about contractors from outside  
45 of the area and coming into their community and leaving at weekends, so we've seen, and required, contractors to stay in in situ to manage some of those concerns.

But whilst we've had to make those operational changes, it has not slowed up the clean-up. As of yesterday, about 84 per cent of all properties have now been cleaned up, and that includes all primary places of residence. So we are well and truly on track.

5

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: So all primary places of residence that registered for clean-up have had their debris removed?

MR MIEZIS: Yes, all the - all that we are aware of have had their debris removed.

10

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. Can I go back to the response of the State of Victoria which is EMV.0015.0001 at 0015? I'm just taking you back to the questions concerning the removal of debris from properties damaged by natural disasters, which is question 16. The question actually was broader than the most recent

15 bushfires. It was speaking to properties damaged more generally. Do you know if there had been a program that dealt with this in advance? That is, that it was part of the existing recovery framework to have a plan should circumstances be that properties were damaged by natural disasters?

20 MR MIEZIS: Yes. So the State of Victoria did a State managed clean-up in 2009 and has undertaken a number of State managed clean-ups since that time. We have a panel of contractors that Emergency Management Victoria had established and that we were able to draw on this time around. So, you know, whilst we were established on 6 January, we announced the appointment of Grocon as the contractor, and that

25 there would be a State led clean-up program on 17 January.

Having those - the history of this and those pre-existing contractual arrangements, meant that we were able to move quite quickly with those announcements and, importantly, give those who had lost their homes some comfort that the State would

30 meet the costs associated with that clean-up.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: As you know, the various States that are granted leave to appear have been asked throughout the course of these questions to provide suggestions for improvement, and the last question here is suggestions for

35 improvement of efficiency, effectiveness and timeliness of such a program. Could we go to the response of the State of Victoria, which is on the next page 16, which is paragraph 100? The answer that's given here is that:

40 *"The State will monitor and evaluate the program upon its completion to identify ways it can be improved for future natural disasters."*

As I read that, Mr Miezis, the State of Victoria has not yet identified any ways to improve the program and won't undertake that task until after the clean-up program has been completed; is that right?

45

MR MIEZIS: So we will undertake a formal evaluation of the program on its completion. Obviously, as we're delivering the program, we are identifying things

that we think could be improved as we move forward, and we will feed into that formal evaluation process.

5 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. What I'm going to do is invite you to actually tell those to the Royal Commission now rather than waiting until after the completion of the program and then completion of your evaluation. Would you be able to identify those improvements that you have identified already?

10 MR MIEZIS: Yes. So one of the key improvements we think we can make is how we balance up the need - or without compromising the safety of - of the clean-up program, but the ability to increase the number of local workers that are involved in the clean-up itself. At the moment, we have about 52 per cent of persons involved in clean-up that are working - are locals that are working on the program.

15 Now, we know that, you know, these are communities that have had significant economic impacts. And, you know, not only in clean-up but in all the recovery activities that we undertake we want to maximise local job opportunities. There has been - there are some challenges in the number of class A contractors, and in Victoria all bushfire affected sites are treated as though they are asbestos  
20 contaminated, which requires certain regulations to apply, in particular around the use of class A contractors.

In local areas, in regional areas, there are often a small number of contractors that have those class A classifications, which means we haven't - we would have liked to  
25 have had more local content. So we will, and have, and will continue to work with WorkSafe as the regulator on what some of those changes we might be able to make to that system that don't compromise safety, recognising that there is asbestos at some of these sites, but at the same time we are able to better meet our objectives for maximising local employment opportunities. So that would be a key one.

30 I think - sorry, the other big learning for us is the need for much better communications. If I reflect on - I think we were waiting on perfection in our plans before we started communicating enough to the community about what was happening when, and I think that was at the detriment to some people who just  
35 wanted a bit of certainty, even if those plans were potentially going to change.

So I think we - my two reflections are certainly how we work with WorkSafe to increase local content in the clean-up, recognising jobs are so important in these bushfire affected communities; and, secondly, just the need for regular  
40 communications, even if the plans aren't perfect, telling people what we know when we know it, will assist.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. Thank you, Mr Miezis. Could we now go over to page 0018? I'm going to ask you just a short question on the response of the State  
45 of Victoria to the questions on the natural environment. You might have heard me mention in the opening this paragraph, we will go over to page 0020 at the top of it, paragraph 109. It's said here:

5 *"Victoria seeks to promote long-term resilience post-fire for key impacted species and ecological communities, ensuring their survival and ability to recover after bushfire. Unless there is deliberate and focused investment, experts have agreed that the probability of some species persisting beyond 10 years is less than one per cent."*

10 What is being done? Having made that observation and having received that advice of those experts, are you able to assist the Commission to let us know what, if any, plan there is to deal with this issue?

15 MR MIEZIS: I don't profess to be an expert in - in biodiversity. You know, certainly these fires, they impacted 1.5 million hectares in Victoria. 90 per cent of that was our parks and forests, which is so critical to our threatened species. So there are a number of programs being run at the State level. There was a \$17.5 million biodiversity program that was announced with grants and other direct investment in biodiversity outcomes.

20 We're looking at reforestation of some of those areas of our parks and forests that have been burnt, recognising that some of those areas was immature forest and it won't reseed itself and will need active intervention. So there are a range of activities being undertaken, as there were during the fire with the eastern bristlebird and other direct actions that were taken. Subsequent to that, a big focus on how we restore and re-establish important habitat characteristics across that large area that was impacted by the fires.

25 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: So to obtain additional information on that, would the best organisation or department within the State of Victoria be DELWP?

30 MR MIEZIS: Yes, it would.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. Thank you. I go to question 6 back on page 6. The State of Victoria was asked to:

35 *"Describe any changes or improvements that the State of Victoria considers could be made to existing recovery frameworks and approaches."*

40 It doesn't appear here that there are any suggestions being made for improvements or any changes. Rather, it seems to be that it is saying that you will wait for the IGEM to provide recommendations. Is that how I ought to understand those paragraphs, Mr Miezis?

45 MR MIEZIS: So I think two points. The first significant change that was made in Victoria in response to these fires was the establishment of Bushfire Recovery Victoria as a permanent and dedicated recovery agency. The first one in Victoria recognising our closest predecessor, the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction Authority established in 2009, had about a two year life. So we've been established as a

permanent agency, and it recognises the unfortunate circumstance where catastrophic fires, like we saw in '19-'20, are the new norm in Victoria.

5 And in announcing the establishment of Bushfire Recovery Victoria as the permanent agency, both our Premier and Minister for Police and Emergency Services certainly highlighted that fact, that - that we are experiencing more and more significant bushfires that are having impacts on communities; that agencies like Emergency Management Victoria and the Emergency Management Commissioner are increasingly needed to drive and lead the response to those fires, and that there  
10 was a need for a dedicated and permanent agency. So that was an immediate change that was made.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: So --

15 MR MIEZIS: We do have the Inspector-General for Emergency Management undertaking a thorough review of recovery arrangements and we expect - and that process will identify further improvements that we can make.

20 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. I'm going to take that in two phases. As I understand the IGEM's activities, the subject matter of his report on relief and recovery won't be delivered this year; it won't be delivered until 2021. Is that right?

MR MIEZIS: That's correct.

25 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. Has Bushfire Recovery Victoria been making any suggestions for improvements to the IGEM in relation to the approaches and the recovery framework?

30 MR MIEZIS: Sorry, yes, the Inspector-General hasn't commenced the analysis or the inquiry into recovery at this point. When it does, we will certainly look to input into that process.

35 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I think the Royal Commission will be assisted knowing now because we won't be here next year. Have there been any improvements or changes that have been identified by Bushfire Recovery Victoria in relation to the existing frameworks or approaches?

40 MR MIEZIS: Look, I think as we have gone and delivered our, and met our responsibilities as an organisation, we've had to be responsive to the needs of - of the community, which has meant that we've had to adjust or amend some of those existing frameworks as we've gone along. A good example of that would be, traditionally when we think about recovery we think about four lines of recovery, and you may have heard this in previous evidence.

45 We deliberately, following discussions with traditional owners and Aboriginal Victorians, identified a fifth line of recovery around Aboriginal culture and healing. Now, that was to recognise significant impact that these fires had on Aboriginal

people but also to ensure that we have culturally appropriate recovery programs that are self-determined by Aboriginal people.

5 So I use that as an example of, as we have gone through and the delivery of recovery services, as a new agency we have been constantly looking at what are the needs of the community? What, in the existing framework works, what doesn't, and what needs to be adjusted? So a new line of recovery is an example of that. But, you know, we have always, as we've gone about our business, looked at, you know, how do we make this work for this circumstance, recognising every fire is different and  
10 every community is different.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I think, in light of that response, Mr Miezis we might give perhaps the - Commissioners - the State of Victoria an opportunity to provide a supplementary response?  
15

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes, I was just going to jump in there. Noting that this part of the IGEM inquiry hasn't even started yet, we're not crossing paths, so I think if you can reword that question for my signature this afternoon, we will go back out with that question. And it's more than just your area, Mr Miezis, it's  
20 Victoria as a whole can answer that.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Indeed, it's not just bushfires, it's .....

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: So we wouldn't want you put you on the spot. But I don't think the question was answered adequately and I don't think we're crossing paths with the IGEM. That part hasn't started yet and it won't be finished until long after we're done. So we will be putting that question back out this afternoon.  
25

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Thank you, Chair. Could we go to 008 which is  
30 Community Hubs and Recovery Centres, question 10? How does Bushfire Recovery Victoria assess whether a recovery hub should be managed by Local Councils or community groups or by BRV, or a combination of both?

MR MIEZIS: So if I take the current fires, we were just very pragmatic and very  
35 practical in how we did it. So East Gippsland Shire had a Bairnsdale Relief Centre that was already up and operating. The community was used to coming to that, that recovery centre. East Gippsland Shire had management structures already in place. So it just made sense for East Gippsland Shire to continue to manage that and to manage the transition of that from a relief centre into a recovery centre, and rather  
40 than us manage it directly we provide support and assistance to East Gippsland Shire in managing that hub. In other places where there was not a relief --

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Just one moment. Could we have the answer shown, please? Question 10. All right. We will leave it. Sorry, Mr Miezis. I just wanted to  
45 give those following and the Commissioners the context of the question that I asked and the answer that you're helpfully providing, which was about how the decision is

made as to who will manage and operate these recovery hubs. I interrupted you.  
Please continue.

5 MR MIEZIS: So it's a very pragmatic decision that, you know, our number one focus is to make sure that we don't disrupt service delivery to community. And, as I was saying in the case of Bairnsdale, East Gippsland Shire was managing that as a relief centre already. It had the structures in place. The community was used to dealing with the people in those centres - in that centre. So it has continued to manage that.

10 In other cases we have made the decision, in consultation with Council, to set up and establish the hub. In doing so, we have employed a local person to manage that hub, again, certainly with Local Council support. So there is no recipe for how those decisions are made. It is, I guess, a process that says: how do we deliver the best outcomes for the community in taking a very pragmatic approach?

15 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: How does BRV determine what services should be provided in those recovery hubs?

20 MR MIEZIS: By and large, in consultation with that community. So we understood very early on, as a result of Ken Lay, who was the Chair of BRV, very early on out consulting with over 32 communities. That gave us good intelligence about what were some of the needs. We knew from the relief centres what some of the important inputs were. We had been meeting with community groups who were telling us about what some of those services were. So it was very much, and will continue to be,  
25 driven by the community. The services that some communities need now, or early on, will change through time.

You know, right now, you know, a big focus on planning and rebuilding, so making sure that we have access to those services through the hubs. Mental health, financial  
30 assistance, you know, we will be guided by the community in terms of the types and the forms of support that they want through the hubs and equally how they want to use those hubs. So, you know, we know, for example, that Orbost community is wanting to hold yoga in its hub because they think that that's - they see that as an important part of their wellbeing and a service that's important for that community.  
35 Now, that will be very different to another hub. So we really are just guided by what are the needs of that particular community and how do we best deliver those services.

40 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Can we go to the top of the page, the top three paragraphs on Spontaneous Volunteers. It's described there the difficulty of having to manage large numbers of spontaneous volunteers and this can be a challenging issue. How can volunteers, based on the experience of BRV, be better used in the recovery phase?

45 MR MIEZIS: I think where we saw volunteers most effective was through those established organisations that play such an important role in recovery; so whether that was through BlazeAid or through Rotary or through those established

organisations that have pre-existing relationships with Local Government or with the emergency management sector itself. We did see early on large numbers of people almost turn up to communities with shovels sort of saying, "What can we do and how can we help?" You know, that incredible generosity, you know, what was and did prove somewhat difficult to manage, and we encourage people to connect in with those existing organisations, or equally, to provide cash in kind of sort of volunteer efforts. So I would say certainly working with those pre-existing organisations that are so important to the recovery process.

10 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: If we go to page 10, which is question 12, which is on funding, and you were asked to:

15 *"Provide most recent figures to recovery funding, payments or assistance made available by the Commonwealth, States and Territories, Local Government, charities and insurance companies to the State of Victoria."*

You provided the State Recovery Report which I identified earlier. I am trying to get a sense, as it's not quite clear from this response, to what is the contribution of the State of Victoria and what is the contribution of the Commonwealth?

20 MR MIEZIS: Okay. The - there's a number of programs that are managed and delivered. So the State of Victoria's overall contribution or funding commitment is up around 317 million. So what you're seeing here is what has been accounted for, reported through the recovery report. At this stage the Commonwealth contribution it is around - and I say "around" because there are still decisions to be made on some of the allocation of some of the announced funding - around 100 to 130 million. The figures you're seeing here is a combination of State based initiatives, Commonwealth funded initiatives, or jointly funded initiatives under disaster recovery funding arrangements.

30 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Just for the benefit of the record, are you able to identify on this series of answers, paragraphs 55 to 58, which are Commonwealth funded initiatives - sorry, the State based initiatives, the Commonwealth funded initiatives or the jointly funded initiatives?

35 MR MIEZIS: So, in paragraph 57, each of those would be - 57.1, 2 and 3, I understand to be jointly funded initiatives. Paragraph 57.4, so the Small Business Bushfire Grants, the \$10,000 grants, for three Local Government areas, Alpine, Towong and East Gippsland, that is 100 per cent Commonwealth funding. For the 40 four - four additional Local Government areas, Wellington, Mansfield, Indigo and Wangaratta, that is co-funded.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right then. Thank you for that clarification. Just while we're on the topic of funding, if we could go to the Appendix 1 which is the State Assistance Measures, that's EMV.0015.0001.0040, and what I wanted to get a sense of is, on page 41, third box which is the Type and Level of Emergency Relief Assistance which is up to a re-establishment payment of 42,250. Is it right to

understand this schedule to say - and if it's not please tell me where to look - if someone had insured their house and some other person had not insured their house, either way they would each be able to receive up to the same threshold, same maximum amount; is that right?

5

MR MIEZIS: So this program was delivered through the Department of Health and Human Services very early on in the recovery piece and hasn't - wasn't - Bushfire Recovery Victoria wasn't directly involved in this program. So, unfortunately, I can't give you the details that you're looking for.

10

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. We will follow-up with them. Thank you for that, Mr Miezis. Now, we can go back to page 31, question 37. The question here was looking to the issue of people who live in different areas, different LGA areas, and different areas generally. I want to take the question a little bit further, which is 173, where you deal with the issue of people living in a cross-border community. Now, my question is this: you've said here that:

15

*"One particular barrier to ensuring consistency of treatment relates specifically to cross-border communities where there is not, or is not yet, a formal national approach dealing with different sides of a State or Territory border."*

20

I want to ask two questions that arise in this. The first is: what is Victoria doing in the interim? That is, how do you treat, and how have you managed, this barrier of inconsistency of treatment?

25

MR MIEZIS: Certainly. So if I focus on the recovery program itself that the Bushfire Recovery Victoria is coordinating, we are just working very, very closely with New South Wales and, in fact, you know, almost working as though the border doesn't exist in terms of how we work with communities, because that's what communities are telling us. So if I use the example of the community of Walwa in north-east or in the Upper Murray area in north-east Victoria, when they talk to us about the establishment of the community recovery committee, they've said, "Look, it makes sense when we think about a community recovery committee to include Jingellic in New South Wales". And we support that and we are working with New South Wales on making that happen because that's just what makes sense for the communities.

30

35

Whilst I know and understand in the initial relief there was some barriers that were experienced we've worked very quickly, both under the national coordination arrangements that are being led by the National Bushfire Recovery Agency, but also just through bilateral conversations and practical discussions with our counterparts in New South Wales to make sure that we've got community at the centre of what we're doing, rather than saying: well, sorry, Walwa, we know your major service centre might be Jingellic but, hey, we can't help you there. It's just a practical approach that says how do we best work with New South Wales to meet the needs of those communities.

40

45

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Mr Miezis, you've spoken of working with New South Wales. Has that arrangement been formalised in a framework or an agreement or cross-border agreement, or some other sort of documentation of the arrangement?

5 MR MIEZIS: Not from Bushfire Recovery Victoria's perspective. I mean, our focus  
very much has been on how do we get these programs moving quickly for - for  
communities. In the due course of time where there does need to be formalisation of  
these arrangements, we will put that in place. But right here and now, the lack of  
10 formal agreement is certainly not providing any barrier to us working with New  
South Wales in that bilateral manner in which we are.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: You say there:

15 *"There is not yet a formal national approach."*

What do you think the formal national approach should be?

MR MIEZIS: It's probably not one that I have necessarily turned my mind  
significantly to. But, you know, where we have had - and Victoria participates, as do  
20 all other States and jurisdictions, in the national coordination forums. We have been  
able to share information to make sure that there is some consistency in programs  
that are being delivered under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. That  
has certainly worked. So those national forums then do allow, you know, for  
information sharing, for learnings to be shared across multi-jurisdictions - multiple  
25 jurisdictions, sorry, I think that - that would be something that would be beneficial to  
continue.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Thank you, Mr Miezis. Can we go to page 33, question  
43? Question 43 at the bottom. Thank you. You were asked by - sorry, the State of  
30 Victoria was asked by the Royal Commission to:

35 *"Describe the key barriers the State of Victoria has encountered in delivering  
response and recovery support, and any ways in which they could be reduced or  
overcome."*

The State of Victoria has provided only "*preliminary observations*". Do you know  
whether there is a plan to give the Royal Commission a definitive response to its  
questions?

40 MR MIEZIS: I think what we've identified here is the key ones that Bushfire  
Recovery Victoria has identified. I - I personally am not aware whether there is any  
intent to provide a different response than what you see here.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. Can we go to the next page, paragraph 191.3?  
45 You speak there about:

*"Limited regional access to mobile communications and national broadband networks has limited the ability to deploy digital delivery alternatives required to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19. BRV has implemented digital kiosks in hubs to assist with digital connectivity barriers."*

5

Now, you said in an earlier answer to a question of mine that - at least as I understood it - that people's ability to actually visit those hubs will be impacted by restrictions because of the social distancing restrictions. You say:

10 *"Outreach programs are also in development."*

What are those outreach programs and what is their status?

15 MR MIEZIS: Yes. So when - so if I can just - a couple of points to make here. You know, the communities that were impacted by these fires are often in quite remote locations, and they ..... connectivity issues. So simply, as we're doing, sort of talking to one another over the line does not work in some of these communities. And for some of the people and demographics that we're working with, they're not necessarily comfortable, or have not used these types of technologies before. So, through our hubs, people can book in, in a supported way, to access, you know, 20 Skype, for example, or whatever it might be, to talk to a financial counsellor. And while they're in the hub, you know, if they want to Skype their grandkids in Sydney, then we've got the technology and the support there to help that happen.

25 In terms of outreach, what we mean there is, you know, going out to the more remote communities. So not every community has a hub but those hubs we operate as a hub-and-spoke model, if I can, where the hub coordinators from those communities - and if I use the example of the hub at Bright, you know, our hub coordinator at Bright will visit and go up to Halls Creek, again to meet one on one, in 30 compliance with all of the COVID-19 restrictions, but to make sure that, you know, those services are delivered there. And again, a number of remote communities - and our focus is we don't want anyone falling through the gaps. So whether it's supporting them to access services online or bringing those services to them in their communities, that's what we're doing.

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MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Can we go up to the paragraph above this, which is 191.2. The State of Victoria has indicated in its response to the Royal Commission that the Commonwealth made announcements prior to State consultation and ahead of recovery planning and development of program guidelines, and saying that this 40 led to confusion and frustration. I've got two questions that emerge from this paragraph. The first is: what are the announcements that are referred to in this paragraph?

45 MR MIEZIS: So, a good example here would be the \$500,000 concessional loans which were announced, and because in Victoria it's Bendigo Bank is the delivery agency for those - and Bendigo Bank, as a bank, has certain regulatory requirements - we had to do a lot of work in making sure that we could finalise those

arrangements before the product could be made available. So, in some cases, you know, even with some of the small business grants, the announcements were made and we still had to do the work to finalise the guidelines, finalise the delivery arrangements in Victoria, which left a bit of a lag.

5

Now, the announcement creates an expectation almost that that product will be available straightaway and, when it's not, you know, that has caused some angst in the community.

10 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I think you gave an answer earlier in which you said that providing information early, even before plans are settled, can at least give some certainty to affected community members. How do you reconcile those two positions?

15 MR MIEZIS: Well, I think there's - in my earlier response I was talking to - talking about, you know, for example, in clean-up, you know, telling someone that their property will be - you know, we hope to be there in the next four weeks as opposed to we hope to be there tomorrow.

20 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I see.

MR MIEZIS: When an announcement is made - so that provides some certainty in terms of scale. When an announcement is made around, you know, the access to particularly financial assistance and it's not available straightaway, then that does create some issues. And I think, you know, that can be overcome, and perhaps it's  
25 nuancing in how those things are announced in terms of, you know: "*this is our intent and, you know, in Victoria, we expect this product to be available at this time*". But in all cases that wasn't done.

30 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: How could consultation be improved in the future?

MR MIEZIS: Look, I think there's a - I think we have learnt very quickly from some of those issues that I just talked about. And when we look at the more recent  
35 announcements around joint funding, there has been that good consultation with the National Bushfire Recovery Agency working with us on making sure that, you know, the programs that are being delivered nationally - and every State has slightly different arrangements. So I understand some of the complexity that the Commonwealth is dealing with here. But, you know, and I think the - the National Recovery Bushfire Agency has certainly acted very quickly to address those issues.  
40 The national forums that we participate in enable us now to work through those issues.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: So the National Bushfire Recovery Agency, like BRV, was also an initiative established in early January, like you. So my question is: is  
45 there value in having a permanent body that is ready to roll, so to speak, whenever a disaster strikes?

MR MIEZIS: I think we, and Bushfire Recovery Victoria has certainly valued the ability to engage with a dedicated agency in the Commonwealth around this issue. Now, whether - what that looks like in the future, I don't have a particular view. But the ability to have that dedicated agency that we - we can talk to, we can  
5 troubleshoot with, and that does have that role in, you know, really looking across all jurisdictions, it is valuable.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: I have two more questions but I'm conscious of the time, Chair.  
10

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Tell you what, we will give your precious voice a break and the Commissioners have a couple of questions. My first question is a follow-on to that. You are BRV, Mr Miezis, but the question is, will you evolve into an all-natural disasters as a standing organisation or you're just going to focus on  
15 bushfires into the future?

MR MIEZIS: So, at this point in time, we've been established as Bushfire Recovery Victoria, and our particular focus is, as you may expect, Commissioner, on the communities that were impacted in the '19-'20 bushfires.  
20

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: And I appreciate you don't want to dilute that right now.

MR MIEZIS: Yes.  
25

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: I'm just sort of looking to the future.

MR MIEZIS: So I think pragmatically in building this organisation I've had a view to developing the capability and capacity within the organisation to be able to respond to any recovery activity that government may ask us to do. So, whilst we have a bushfire focus right now, as we thought about developing and building the agency we have had an eye to what, you know, what may come in the future and what government may ask us to do. And, as I mentioned earlier, the Inspector-General for Emergency Management in Victoria will look more broadly at recovery. And I'm  
30 sure that that would inform any of those subsequent decisions around the broadening of the scope of Bushfire Recovery Victoria.  
35

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. Thank you. In the question that we will send out this afternoon, it would help us if you were to highlight the issues - every time you stand up an agency like this, you can't hit the ground running straightaway. There are things that you must do and, therefore, there's an impact of that on when the recovery response can actually physically start. We would be interested in an observation there as well because I think that will inform our recommendations in the future on what happens more nationally as well.  
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MR MIEZIS: Yes. No, absolutely. I think, you know, it has been a challenging almost, if I can, building the plane and flying it at the same time; that that real benefit

of a standing capability I think puts State of Victoria in a really good position going forward.

5 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes, and I've seen that advertisement as well. It's a great film clip, "We build aeroplanes." Okay. I've got one more question and then I will go to Commissioner Bennett and Commissioner and Commissioner Macintosh. If we can have paragraph 17 of that document up, please. And you will help us on the search here for definitive information, Mr Miezis.

10 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: It is page 4?

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Page 4. Right there. Okay. So SRRG, as a part of ANZEMC, is a policy organisation. Trying to hunt them down a little bit is quite difficult at the moment because they are an independent advisory group to  
15 ANZEMC. I understand Victoria has the Chair of that group at the moment; is that correct?

MR MIEZIS: It may well do, Commissioner. But if the Chair is in Victoria, it's not in Bushfire Recovery Victoria, so it might have pre-existed us. So I would need to  
20 inquire.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: You're sort of heading down the answers I expected. But can I just ask - you may not be the right person then - but obviously, because they're a recovery reference group, how much interface do they have with you as a  
25 recovery - Bushfire Recovery Victoria?

MR MIEZIS: I have not met with the Social Recovery Reference Group that's described here. That said, certainly we have had particular working groups that have been established and stood up around these fires, the '19-'20 fires that is, that look  
30 across, you know, almost every line of recovery, including - including social recovery. So, whilst there has been pre-existing and well established forums that really look at a policy level around some of these arrangements, our focus has very much been on the practical pragmatic delivery of services right now and the arrangements that we need to put in place, working with our counterparts to make  
35 that happen as effectively as we can for communities.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. So the document there, *Guidelines for Interstate Assistance Community and Recovery 2018*, provides - in fact, I don't believe that's the current document either. The new document, I think it's *Guidelines  
40 for Inter-Jurisdiction Assistance Community Recovery 2020*. But regardless, what the intent there is to set up a mechanism for assistance between States. I understand Victoria has helped other States in the past under this framework. Has Victoria called on the *Guidelines for Assistance to Victoria* in the 2019-2020 bushfire season?

45 MR MIEZIS: Commissioner, not for recovery, not formally. That said, there's a lot of information sharing going on across - across jurisdictions. And, you know, where we're seeing something that works very well in New South Wales, then they've been

very generous in providing us advice, you know, so that we can get the same effectiveness. A good example of that would be, you know, the \$10,000 Small Business Grants: when they were initially announced, we saw quite a significant and huge uptake in New South Wales relative to Victoria. And even accounting for the  
5 difference in the size of the impact between the two States, it did not make sense to us. And certainly we worked very closely with New South Wales and they supported us in understanding what they were doing differently to us that was resulting in such a massive uptake.

10 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay.

MR MIEZIS: And, you know, very quickly we were able to diagnose it. It was a simple online application form that Services New South Wales had rolled out, that we were then able to learn from, replicate in Victoria, and as a result of that we saw a  
15 significant increase in uptake. So, whilst we haven't necessarily relied on formal guidelines for interstate assistance, we are all very much working together to make sure that collectively we can deliver the best outcomes for impacted communities.

20 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. Thank you for your answer. Commissioner Bennett?

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Thank you. Mr Miezis, I was intrigued, I must say, by the answer to the question about the ongoing Commonwealth agency responsible for recovery going forward. It said "*Victoria doesn't have a formal position on a*  
25 *stand-alone Commonwealth agency*". Do I take it that informally, though, from what you've said, that you support it?

MR MIEZIS: I think I would say informally we have really benefitted from having a dedicated agency for recovery that we have been able to work very closely with, and  
30 that that has provided real benefits for Victorian communities.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Thank you. I think that you've highlighted - I mean, through the course of this, these answers, and I won't bother putting them up, there has been a highlight of a number of areas where I think there has been specific  
35 identification of a useful national - I hate the word "framework" - frameworks, that's because it says it here. So one was a national monitoring and evaluation framework for disaster recovery programs and you see that as I positive, I assume?

MR MIEZIS: Yes, I think the ability to have evaluation and lessons learned and mechanisms to do that at the national level are really important. Whilst we, as an  
40 organisation, will have our own evaluation processes and our own lessons learned processes, being able to feed those into at the national level and to share those learnings and to ultimately, as we all are, focus on delivering better outcomes when a future disaster occurs, that's invaluable.

45 COMMISSIONER BENNETT: I also picked up that you said you contribute to national level improvements. Do I take it, when you said now sharing, it's not just a

question of contributing? If you see that a national framework offers something better than Victoria has individually implemented because of learnings from other jurisdictions, you would then take the view that that was a useful matter for Victoria then to implement and perhaps, alter or change its present arrangements if you thought it --

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MR MIEZIS: Yes, absolutely. Our focus, as I said is, you know, really on how do you get the best services and best support to communities. And, you know, we're not parochial in terms of where we take those learnings from. If something is working better in another State and we think it makes sense to implement that in Victoria, then yes, we will do that.

15  
COMMISSIONER BENNETT: And I think you've also highlighted that there should be or there could usefully be consistent guidelines on the preparation and sharing of impact assessment data across jurisdictions?

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MR MIEZIS: Yes. Yes, that's right. Again, being able to compare, if you like, apples and apples when we're looking at what the impacts are is - again, would be useful and, you know, something that we think we would - we would value.

25  
COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Okay. Thank you. I just want to go to a couple of little points arising in respect of that. You've said in one of the answers that you're working with State departments and agencies to establish more streamlined data sharing. Are you also working to have streamlined data sharing with the Commonwealth?

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MR MIEZIS: Yes. It's probably fair to say that we're starting with the State agencies and being able to - you know, we're focused on developing a platform here in Victoria that State agencies can input data into, that can be easily accessed and reported on. You know, a natural extension of that, in my mind, is into Local Government, into Commonwealth Government and into non-government sector, because there are a lot of participants that are active in supporting community recovery. What we need to avoid is, you know, an individual having to tell their story of trauma over and over again to different actors.

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COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Yes, we heard that a lot in the communities. Can I just ask you a question? Are you aware that the NBRA has brought in a portal or a platform called Recovery Connect?

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MR MIEZIS: Yes.

45  
COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Is Victoria planning to - I mean, you talk about the State agencies putting in models. It seems to me that seems to be a one stop portal for information across, it's anticipated to be across the country. Wouldn't that be something the Victoria could utilise an existing or an already developing Commonwealth framework, and perhaps utilise that in order to go beyond telling people - starting off, as I understand it, telling people what programs might be

available to their benefit during the course of recovery? Is Victoria doing that, or planning to do that, or do you have plans in place?

5 MR MIEZIS: So, in terms of communication of the programs that are available, we do that. We also point people to the Commonwealth. You know, again as we've been establishing as organisations, one of our principles has been there's no wrong door. So if you go to the Commonwealth you can get information. If you come through a Victorian channel you can get the same information. Moving forward .....

10 COMMISSIONER BENNETT: That's a redundancy. I mean, if there's one that tells people across jurisdictions what's available, why have a second one giving the same information? I'm sorry, I don't understand.

15 MR MIEZIS: So I think it has just been a function of new organisations standing up and wanting to make sure that the community can access information. As we move forward, we will look to leverage existing systems and processes, absolutely. But there are also differences between, you know, as organisations and the data systems that I was - we referred to in this response, are really internal management, you know, we, as a delivery agency, need a particular level of information that is quite  
20 granular and, you know, we want to focus on and know our optimal outcome is that we know where an individual is at on their recovery journey.

We want to know what access they've had to support. We want to know what they may not have accessed. We want to know what is the potential, the next obstacle or  
25 the next barrier that they're going to face, and we want to be able to proactively move those barriers out of the way for people. To do that we need a good State-based information system. Now, in building that, absolutely we will leverage whatever it - what exists in the Commonwealth where it makes sense to do so. And I should say that the types of information that we've made available are really on our website.  
30 We're not talking here about significant investment that has been made. It's about practically understanding where people go for information and making that information available to them.

35 COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Okay. Thank you. One other question, and it was raised with you in the context of, I suppose, insurance and how people are dealt with. I mean, I understand the concept of needs based and I think most recovery programs refer again and again, I think your response as well to it being a needs based, but I have a difficulty understanding that if people are getting assistance purely on needs based, where insurance and individual steps to mitigate or, you know, spending  
40 money in order to mitigate possible disaster effects, where that fits into the concept of everyone just being given whatever they need on a needs base? So why would - if two people, one is insured and one is not insured and they both lose their house in a bushfire, and they're getting the same recovery payout as assistance, then where in the recovery program are you looking at the incentives for people to look after  
45 themselves and either spend money to mitigate or to insure?

MR MIEZIS: So I think it's a really important point that you make, and the moral dilemma, if you like, about not dis-incentivising the uptake of insurance. And when we talk needs based, you know, the needs and impact in one Local Government area can be quite different to another and the impacts in one community can be quite different to another. So that needs --

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: I'm talking within a community. Let's just talk about at the moment, because that's where the examples are stronger, within a community two people, side by side in the same street in the same community, impacted by the same fire and one has insured and one hasn't?

MR MIEZIS: So if I can use a couple of examples of the services and supports that we're providing to those individuals. So State based clean-up, it did not matter whether you were insured or not insured, you had access to that program. What we did is work very closely with the Insurance Council of Australia to make sure that, you know, where people were insured, the benefits of - the financial benefits of a State-based program were passed on to the policy holder. So we did not differentiate between insured or not insured, but what we did want to make sure is that those that did take out insurance were the beneficiaries of a State-based program in terms of, you know, the passing on of any savings that an insurance company might receive. Temporary housing --

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Sorry, can I interrupt you. Can I stop just you for a second to try and understand that? What you're saying is you don't penalise someone for having had insurance? Basically, that's that point, isn't it?

MR MIEZIS: That's correct.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Okay.

MR MIEZIS: We do not want to disincentivise people taking up insurance going forward.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Right. But if you're going to replace the home, rebuild the home, possibly with a betterment provision, let's even leave that out, but if you're going to rebuild the home and the two homes are going to be rebuilt to the same standard by the State, then where's the incentive to insure?

MR MIEZIS: So the State is not rebuilding the homes. The State has been doing the clean-up of the damaged and destroyed buildings. There is no current program in the Victorian Government that would assist someone in rebuilding their home. All the programs that we have - sorry, in the actual construction of the home. So the programs that we have in place, clean-up would be one. The assessment of bushfire attack levels, they're done settlement wide. We're not discriminating again between insured or not insured in how we deliver those programs. It's providing the assistance to those that have been impacted in a way that does not disincentivise people to take up insurance going forward.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Yes. I'm not sure I understand how that works practically, but I will leave it at that because of the time. Thank you.

5 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Thank you. Commissioner Macintosh.

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Mr Miezis. In the submission the Victorian Government raises the importance of having a national protocol for impact data collection, and I just wondered whether Victoria has its own  
10 protocol for collecting impact data? The reason I ask is we've received impact data in a wide variety of forms that is clearly inconsistent and I just wondered whether your jurisdiction has a protocol to ensure that, at least within the jurisdiction, there is consistency?

15 MR MIEZIS: There are some protocols that are in place. It is fair to say that, you know, as an organisation we are so reliant on that impact data because it helps us understand the impacts and then shape the programs. And there are improvements that can be made to those protocols and it's certainly something that we will look at going forward. But yes, there are protocols but, you know, as can happen and as, you  
20 know, in some cases should happen, those protocols are applied in a particular circumstance and don't always deliver the outcome that you want or need.

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Yes, thanks for that. Another one: you raised before the small business bushfire support grant and how it had been extended to  
25 four additional shires, Indigo, Mansfield, Wangaratta and Wellington Shires. Can you explain to us why it was extended to those shires and why it was so late? What was special about them?

MR MIEZIS: So the initial three Local Government areas that were included within  
30 the small business grant program were amongst the 20 most impacted nationally. That was 100 per cent funded by the Commonwealth Government and, as I mentioned before, when that program rolled out we did not see the level of uptake initially that we expected to in Victoria. So pragmatically we wanted to make sure that the system was working and, in fact, that the program was meeting the need  
35 before we looked at expansion.

Where we did expand it, it went to the other three Local Government areas that were part of the stated disaster declaration in Victoria and Indigo Shire, because some of the economic analysis that was done through the Department of Jobs, Precinct and  
40 Regions really showed that there was a particular impact on small businesses within that Local Government area.

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Right. So they were indirectly affected rather than being directly affected?

45 MR MIEZIS: Yes. The \$10,000 grants were really for indirectly affected businesses, yes.

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Yes, right. So that raises questions about consistency across both jurisdictions, across events, across different types of businesses I suppose as well. Is that a matter of concern for you and for the Victorian  
5 Government, ensuring consistent treatment, at least in relation to Commonwealth funded programs, that there is consistency across jurisdiction, across areas?

MR MIEZIS: So that there is consistency, Commissioner. So the guidelines are consistent across jurisdictions. It was up to the jurisdictions to make the decision  
10 about when or if that program was expanded beyond the original 20 Local Government areas that were funded wholly by the Commonwealth Government. But each jurisdiction, as I understand it, did make that decision, but they were made at different times. But the nature of the program, the eligibility criteria are consistent across jurisdictions.

15 COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Right. Thanks. Thank you, Mr Miezis. Thanks, Chair.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Ms Hogan-Doran?  
20

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: One of my questions was dealt with and I just have one small question and then I have some updated information --

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay.  
25

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: -- in terms of procedure. Mr Miezis, page 30 of the Victorian response, paragraph 167 deals with Victoria's Natural Disaster Financial Assistance Scheme which is available to eligible undertakings to relieve some of the financial burden. As I understand it, the initial threshold to access that scheme is  
30 \$100,000. What happens when that threshold is not met? Do, for example, Local Councils have to foot that bill in the absence of that assistance?

MR MIEZIS: This program is administered by Emergency Management Victoria, and is not a question that I can respond to directly.  
35

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: And is the reason --

MR MIEZIS: It is very much --

40 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Is the reason it is administered by Emergency Management Victoria because the issue I'm asking about is minor disaster events, and you're only responsible for bushfire, and the most recent bushfire?

MR MIEZIS: Because - and a function, again, of the newness of my organisation.  
45 Emergency Management Victoria has - has been administering the trust and managing the trust and, as I said, continues to do so. Our focus, again, is on very much on the operational delivery.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. We will take that up with Emergency Management Victoria. Thank you very much, Mr Miezis, I don't have any additional questions.

5

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Mr Miezis, thank you this morning, thank you for persevering with us as we head through the technical issues that we've had. But we do appreciate your insights and how forthright you've been in looking to what it's like to stand up an agency in the middle of a crisis. And Mr Attiwill, do you have any questions, seeing as you're online, or comments?

10

MR ATTIWILL QC: No, I don't, Commissioner. No I don't, thank you.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Thank you for your perseverance as well. We appreciate that.

15

MR ATTIWILL QC: That's all right. Thank you.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Might Mr Miezis be released from his summons?

20

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Mr Miezis may be released from his summons. We appreciate it. Thank you very much.

MR MIEZIS: Thank you.

25

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. I'm looking at activity going on back there.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: There is, Chair. I'm told that we should be back online after lunch but not for the ACT. We're reaching out to the ACT legal representatives to determine whether or not they have any issues about being - proceeding the same way as Victoria, subject, of course, to your position, Chair.

30

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. What we will do, we will adjourn until a time to be advised and we will sort this out offline on how we are going to proceed. And I understand that we're well into the hearings, this is the first technical issue we've had like this. So I want to make sure we get it right as we proceed, so that we are fully transparent and the public can see the proceedings.

35

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right.

40

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: So we will adjourn until a time to be decided.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: All right. And would that be advised via website and the video stream link?

45

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Correct.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Thank you, Chair.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Thank you.

5 <ADJOURNED 11:54 AM>

<RESUMING 2:00 PM>

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Ms Hogan-Doran, good afternoon.

10

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Good afternoon, Chair. I will just provide an update and also some proposed procedural changes --

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay.

15

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: -- to deal with the balance of the witness. We have now, I understand, re-established the live stream, which we didn't have for the last witness. The evidence of Mr Lee Miezis who was the CEO of Bushfire Recovery Victoria, was taken, for those that are now following on the live stream, was taken - received  
20 this morning with the concurrence of the State of Victoria. That has been recorded. That recording will be made available on the website later this evening. The transcript has been finalised and is in the process of being uploaded to the website, and should be available, if not now, any moment.

25 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: It was going on as we walked in.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: There we go. So that will be available to everybody. It is proposed that the witnesses from the ACT and from Western Australia will be taken by Ms Dovey this afternoon; and that the summonses issued to Ms Prendergast and  
30 Mr Presland of State of New South Wales be adjourned to 1.30 pm on Monday, 13 July, at which time the Commission would anticipate sitting for approximately one and a half to two hours.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. And that works, it's better than probably sitting  
35 at 7 o'clock tonight for two hours. So I think moving it to Monday is a better time to be able to do that. And my apologies to the New South Wales witnesses there, but I thank them for accommodating the change.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: If you could formally order those summonses be stood  
40 over?

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: I order those summonses be stood over until Monday.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: And I tender from the third supplementary list exhibit  
45 21.1.1 which is the New South Wales Supplementary Response to the Notice to Give dated 9 July 2020 which is a two-page document. I also tender the National Insurance Project Final Report for the Mitigation and Risk Subcommittee of

Australia and New Zealand Emergency Management Committee dated 15 January 2020 which was provided by the State of New South Wales, accompanying that supplementary response. It is referred to in the New South Wales principal response in answer to question 54. So those two documents for tender, Chair.

5

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. We will take both those documents as exhibits.

<EXHIBIT 21.1 NSW SUPPLEMENTARY RESPONSE DOCUMENT 21.1.1 AND NATIONAL INSURANCE PROJECT FINAL REPORT DOCUMENT 21.1.2>

10

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: And I think that's all by way of housekeeping. Thank you, Chair.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Ms Dovey.

15

MS DOVEY: Next up, and with a little bit of a delay, we have a witness from the Australian Capital Territory. I call Mr Bren Burkevics, Executive Branch Manager, Security and Emergency Management Branch of the Australian Capital Territory.

20

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Mr Burkevics, thank you for joining us. Apologies again for delaying you and appreciate your patience.

MS DOVEY: And Mr Burkevics will affirm.

25

MR BURKEVICS: Thank you Chair.

<BREN BURKEVICS, AFFIRMED>

<EXAMINATION BY MS DOVEY>

30

MS DOVEY: Mr Burkevics, first up, I would like to turn to the effect on the Australian Capital Territory of the recent bushfire season. We're all aware, I think, of the bushfires that came through Canberra in 2003. But in terms of the most recent season, if we could please go to the ACT's response to the notice, so  
35 ACT.500.001.0001 at page 0043. I think this is a map of the Orroral Valley fire; is that right?

MR BURKEVICS: That's correct. That's a map of the fire, the final footprint as it was extinguished.

40

MS DOVEY: Yes. Can you please tell the Commissioners a little bit about the effect of that fire on the Australian Capital Territory and, in particular, the indirect effect on people within Canberra?

45

MR BURKEVICS: Thank you, and I acknowledge the Commission's work and interest in this matter, in particular, recovery. The fire, and I would like to start by essentially the impacts of the fire prior to the ignition of the Orroral. So the smoke of

the New South Wales fire significantly impacted the ACT from January. There was high levels of hazardous smoke across the ACT for several weeks, which preceded the ignition of the Orroral Valley fire. I think starting with the original impact of the smoke, there was impact indirect of that prior to the fire on businesses in the ACT and a lot of businesses and other activities undertaken outdoors.

Obviously, it was too difficult to undertake, in many cases, activities and business outdoors. After the impact of the Orroral Valley fire. We saw again concern on the Canberra community and the recollection of events of 2003 which obviously are still significant to those living in the affected areas.

Again, the fire was - had a significant impact to the ACT on the, again, business impact, and again has rendered significant areas of the Namadgi National Park unusable for a considerable period of time. So a combination of both fire impact and smoke impact indirectly on a lot of businesses in the Canberra community.

MS DOVEY: When you refer to the effect, particularly on people who experienced the 2003 bushfires, can you explain a little bit more about why there's a particular effect there?

MR BURKEVICS: The 2003 bushfires was a significant natural disaster in the ACT. It impacted over 500 - destroyed over 500 houses along the western perimeter of the Canberra urban edge. Memories of Canberrans, for those still living in the ACT, will remember that day. It was a significant disaster impacting many, including several loss of lives. So, even after a period of time has passed, any significant fire, particularly to the west of the ACT or in the rural areas of the ACT, still has the potential to cause considerable concern to those that were living in the ACT in 2003.

MS DOVEY: And in this most recent season, did the ACT set up, I think it's two relief centres; is that correct?

MR BURKEVICS: That's correct, and a relief centre was established in January, in early January, in response to the events of New South Wales. That was deemed necessary due to the high number of interstate people that were evacuating or on the move from their places interstate, New South Wales and Victoria. As presented in the - in the Notice to Give, there was several hundred people that passed through that relief centre at the Dickson College, and that is in accordance with the ACT's recovery arrangements, that facility.

MS DOVEY: Yes. The Orroral Valley bushfire, at page 0017 it set out that it burnt 87,903 hectares, so almost 88,000 hectares. Are you able to describe the damage, particularly to the Namadgi National Park that was caused?

MR BURKEVICS: Yes, I can certainly touch on that. I will highlight that's not my area of expertise in terms of environmental impact, but I can certainly touch on the key areas of impact. The Namadgi National Park is an area of significant natural, cultural and heritage value to the ACT. It's part of the ACT's water catchment. It was

significantly impacted during the 2003 bushfires, and this bushfire has burnt over 80,000 hectares of the park, causing significant damage.

5 So several items of heritage value were lost. There was - there has been impact on quite a few of the recreational areas that the Canberra community can use and, of course, significant damage to the trees and wildlife and sensitive areas that were closely monitored and prepared prior to the arrival of the bushfire. So as much work was done to protect those areas, but significant area of the parks was significantly damaged, including the loss of countless wildlife.

10 MS DOVEY: And is the damage that was caused, is that something for which you're able to obtain Commonwealth funding to remediate that damage?

15 MR BURKEVICS: The ACT is still in discussions with the Commonwealth in terms of the arrangements for that fire. Under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, that I have responsibility for coordinating in the ACT, there is - the environment is not currently recognised as an area under the DRFA that allows a cooperative approach to recovery. So it is a significant gap for the ACT at the moment in pursuing funding under the DRFA to replace areas or to recover the environmental needs of Namadgi National Park which is, beyond the immediate community effects, is the highest priority for the ACT.

20 MS DOVEY: Now, this isn't mentioned in your response so I don't know whether you can speak to it, but I don't believe that Jervis Bay comes up in the description of what happened in the fires, and I was just wondering if you're able to speak to whether the fires affected Jervis Bay and whether that fits within your, or the Australian Capital Territory's, recovery obligations when there's a disaster?

25 MR BURKEVICS: I'm sorry, I'm not able to talk to recovery. I'm not aware of the recovery arrangements for that - for the community there in - in Jervis Bay.

30 MS DOVEY: Do you know who is responsible?

35 MR BURKEVICS: No, I'm sorry, I don't. I believe New South Wales has a role. But it is a Commonwealth territory. So, yes, I'm not - I can't talk any further in terms of recovery priorities in terms of Jervis Bay or who undertakes it.

40 MS DOVEY: Okay. Thank you. I would like to move on to recovery coordination. Before I ask you more generally about how recovery happens within the Territory, can I ask you to briefly explain your role as it relates to natural disasters?

45 MR BURKEVICS: Sure. The ACT has a tiered approach to recovery. At the strategic level, of course, the ACT Government has strategic leadership and responsibility for recovery matters, similar to what we're seeing now as part of the response to COVID. At an officials level, the ACT's equivalent State Crisis Committee, SEMSOG, Security Emergency Management Senior Officials Group, has strategic coordination across all of the ACT Government in terms of recovery.

My role as the Executive Branch Manager for Security Emergency Management Branch is to chair the ACT Recovery Committee which coordinates recovery policy development and coordination in response to natural disaster matters in the ACT. So  
5 it's very much a tiered approach depending upon the level of decision-making or coordination requirement.

10 MS DOVEY: You mentioned earlier that people were - you set up a relief centre for people coming from New South Wales fires. When you're looking at coordination of recovery in the ACT, is support being offered to people from outside of the Territory part of the normal planning processes? Is that something that you take into account?

15 MR BURKEVICS: Absolutely. I think wherever there's a community in need, it is important that that be factored into the planning. As highlighted in evidence provided, there was some discussions occurred earlier with the Australian  
20 Government about activating the DRFA for that matter. And the DRFA policy does not contain provisions for activating a DRFA in one State where the natural disaster is occurring in another State. Irrespective of that policy issue, the ACT did activate the relief centre, which was - proved to be highly valued by those passing through  
and as - as evidence highlighted, significant levels of emergency accommodation, relief, counselling, and other support provided to those passing through.

MS DOVEY: I think if we can go to page 0021, in the second paragraph on the page,  
25 just so we can highlight - you've drawn out that there were significant numbers of people who came in from the New South Wales south coast, Snowy Mountains, as well as people from the ACT.

MR BURKEVICS: That's correct. If I can draw out --

30 MS DOVEY: Yes.

MR BURKEVICS: -- a specific example of there was actually a report when the  
35 recovery centre, after it was initially opened for the first 24 hours, the time was scaled back and, from memory, it opened at 7 or 8 in the morning. A report came in from the Dickson centre that somebody had driven through the night from Victoria and parked their car there and slept in the car overnight. Just simply they realised that they could seek assistance and so they drove throughout the night and were sleeping in their car.

40 MS DOVEY: So from as far away as Victoria?

MR BURKEVICS: Correct.

MS DOVEY: Can I ask you to describe the interaction with the Commonwealth that  
45 you have in relation to recovery support, both planning and getting funding in respect of specific support provided?

MR BURKEVICS: The majority of coordination and policy development with the Australian Government occurs through the Australian New Zealand Emergency Management Committee, ANZEMC, and there's a subcommittee as part of ANZEMC, the Community Outcomes and Recovery Subcommittee, CORS, which has a significant focus on national coordination of recovery matters. There's also a DRFA stakeholders group. Now, that generally meets twice yearly, depending on the needs, and progresses work around DRFA matters. So there's ongoing contact around the DRFA as well as three-monthly reporting of whether there has been any natural disasters occur in the State or Territory.

MS DOVEY: And with the introduction this year of the NBRA has that been of assistance to the ACT?

MR BURKEVICS: From my experience on several of the working groups set up, my view is it has been of benefit. I think there has been some early challenges of working out the responsibilities between Emergency Management Australia and the National Bushfire Recovery Agency. But I think any effort, particularly at a national level, to bring our States and Territories and the Australian Government together to talk about and discuss and prioritise recovery, recovery matters, recovery policy, has been a benefit. And it's highlighted in evidence that the ACT did see that the development of three and more grant programs was useful. And in some aspects delay - reduced delays that might be encountered to people being able to access grants and loan programs particularly from States and Territories that don't normally have a significant need for those sort of programs.

MS DOVEY: Yes. You say, or the response says, at page 0006 that:

*"The ACT has various MOUs in place with New South Wales to request interstate resources such as SES, RFS, ambulance."*

Is that also true for longer-term recovery type resources, or is it really limited to that sort of response and relief phase?

MR BURKEVICS: The primary MOUs for those agencies that possess them is around that immediate response and immediate relief. For longer-term recoveries, I'm only aware of the one MOU, as presented in evidence, which relates to social recovery and the ability for States and Territories to work together to provide support around social recovery matters and, as is highlighted, that was last activated during the Queensland floods or tropical cyclone.

MS DOVEY: What you're to there is the Social Reference Recovery Group Guidelines for Inter-Jurisdictional Assistance; is that right?

MR BURKEVICS: That's correct.

MS DOVEY: Certainly. And 20 staff from the ACT were deployed up to Townsville in the floods in 2019?

MR BURKEVICS: Yes, that's correct. It's an area for the ACT, as a well-planned, generally significant natural disaster free territory. It's an area that the ACT does get considerable benefit and experience from, from being able to support other States and Territories in their recovery needs. So, from the deployments the ACT has undertaken in the past, the feedback is they've proved to be very, very useful in developing a capability and experience of ACT officials undertaking recovery duties.

MS DOVEY: Yes. Were you personally involved with the process of that deployment under those guidelines?

MR BURKEVICS: No. They're - they're undertaken in a separate directory in community, Community Services Directorate, and so a separate agency undertakes that. I do have a number of staff, however, in my branch that have been trained to undertake that function and were deployed to Townsville during that incident. And, again, the feedback was that they found it useful and beneficial and enlightening to be engaging with a disaster-affected community and doing their absolute best to navigate the complexities of administration and recovery matters to provide support.

MS DOVEY: Yes. Operationally, in terms of the use of those guidelines, is it a State-to-State communication that initiates that support going from one State to the another, or does the Social Recovery Reference Group play an operational role in facilitating the deployment?

MR BURKEVICS: My understanding in reading the guidelines - and, again, I highlight that those guidelines are, or that MOU are managed by a community services directorate outside the one I'm with. But my understanding, in reading the guidelines, is that there is a considerable degree of facilitation between officials that - the Social Recovery Reference Group, the SRRG, that initially coordinate and call upon assistance from other States and Territories. And then it obviously goes through the more formal mechanisms too to request that help.

MS DOVEY: Okay. Thank you. Just one moment. Moving on to coordination with community partners, if we can please go to, at the bottom of page 0006 over to - the inter-jurisdictional guidelines that we were just talking about from the SRRG, do you know if they were triggered? Does ACT send anyone to assist during the most recent bushfires or bring anyone in to assist?

MR BURKEVICS: I'm not aware that they were triggered for the - for the bushfires.

MS DOVEY: Okay. Thank you very much. Turning to the Memorandum of Understanding for Social Recovery Cooperation between Community Services Directorate and Community Functional Partners, as shown there, and then over the page, can you please speak to the - describe how that agreement came about and the way in which it operates? And perhaps while you're speaking to that, we can pull up the document itself which is at page 0140 to 0141.

MR BURKEVICS: Sure. Thank you, and certainly can I acknowledge all of the wonderful community organisations that have supported and undertaken critical duties during - during the bushfire emergency. It was a significant - significant response by those community organisations that give tirelessly. In the ACT, that MOU has been a significant success and is very, very important in terms of the ACT's emergency management arrangements and recovery arrangements.

So it provides a formal mechanism, not legally binding of course, but to bring together jurisdictions and/or community organisations, government, non-government, to form a collective understanding of how to respond in an emergency. The agencies that are listed in that MOU play a critical role in the ACT's response and recovery efforts, particularly in the activation of a relief centre or an evacuation centre, depending on the needs. And they were, they were activated during the bushfires of January, initially at the Dickson Relief Centre, and then subsequently at the Erindale Recovery Centre after the Orroral Valley fire.

So those organisations, they meet regularly. So there is a committee that meets and reports up to the recovery committee, ACT's recovery committee. So there is a formal engagement regularly to ensure that there is current readiness and policy understanding, particularly ahead of the summer months. And, finally, I think there is - there is a mechanism for those agencies to recover costs from the government should they be activated. And we do undertake regular exercises, not only in response to natural disasters - some recent events that have - that have triggered those organisations, have been terrorist related exercise and simulations, and again, providing - providing those organisations to test and exercise their capabilities which were during January proved to be very, very successful.

MS DOVEY: And, as we can see here in Schedule C to the document, it provides a very clear outline of what each of these partners' role would be when something is set up and so everyone knows how they fit into the puzzle; is that right?

MR BURKEVICS: That's absolutely correct. So all the - all the different agencies there have a - have their roles and responsibilities outlined in the document, and again so there is no confusion or understanding when they're called upon what's required. Again, that has proved very, very effective for the ACT to have these organisations ready and available to respond to whatever the events, emergency is, and provide the support as indicated in the document.

MS DOVEY: Including, I note at the very end there on the right-hand side, The Volunteering and Contact ACT is tasked with, amongst other things, matching and referring volunteers to other community functions partners and other organisations?

MR BURKEVICS: That's correct. Volunteering and Contact ACT is a community organisation. They play a key role in aligning people that are interested in volunteering with other volunteer organisations. And they - they help facilitate during emergencies that - that provision of assistance which, unless done well, can quite quickly become out of control and disorganised and cause frustration. So I do

recognise the work of volunteering and Contact ACT in supporting emergency management and recovery arrangements.

5 MS DOVEY: Can we please go to page 0008. Now, one of the matters that was described as - can we just, under the heading Loan and Grant Administration Resource Sharing, what are the challenges that you've identified for the ACT is in relation to administration support around funding? Can you please speak to this development and the interaction that you've had with QRIDA?

10 MR BURKEVICS: Sure, and I will certainly recognise that this has been quite a successful outcome; again, has helped to reduce any unnecessary delay in the delivery of recovery support funding to affected communities. Of course, as I mentioned before, the ACT is a well-planned, safe - safe city that - that is generally free from the significant natural disasters that we typically see regularly in other  
15 States and Territories. So, over time, there hasn't been a critical need to invest in expensive technology or systems that provide grant and loan management requirements. That is a labour intensive, difficult role and system that requires significant effort.

20 After the activation of the category B loans under the DRFA, there was - there was a view that it would be better served and faster by collaborating with another agency and engaging another agency that has got far more experience, expertise and systems than the ACT maintains by default. So discussions with QRIDA led to an agreement that QRIDA would develop and deliver the category B loans on behalf of the ACT.  
25 That required some minor administrative changes to existing forms that were already ready to go that QRIDA were using, and as a result three - three businesses were successful in their loan applications through the QRIDA process.

30 And that occurred in a matter of weeks and certainly recognised QRIDA's support and standing capabilities, which the ACT views is probably an opportunity moving forward that rather than duplicating all States and Territories particularly those that are smaller and don't have - potentially don't have as much experience or capability to maintain those systems, that there is significant opportunity to collaborate,  
35 particularly around - there might be the opportunity to use a systems capability with the Australian Government, which is obviously well developed.

MS DOVEY: You've referred there to the potential use of existing systems of Services Australia. Did you have a particular form of funding that that would be used  
40 for in mind, in that suggestion?

MR BURKEVICS: I think certainly the allocation of grants is an area worth exploring. So one-off grants during disasters might be an area that the ACT may wish to pursue. I think grant management is a challenging labour intensive process. And having - having access to existing systems or capability that can expedite those  
45 grants and loans systems or payment processes, where eligible, would be beneficial to the faster delivery of recovery services. So I think there is certainly an opportunity to revisit and review how - how grants and loans are managed nationally, and

whether there is opportunities for improved collaboration between States and Territories and the Australian Government to expedite those payments.

5 MS DOVEY: Is that something in respect of which the ACT has engaged in negotiations or communications with the Commonwealth or QRIDA in terms of ongoing access to those sorts of assistances?

10 MR BURKEVICS: I think any long-term decision to engage another jurisdiction to assist, or the Australian Government, is obviously a matter for decision by the ACT Government. However, there has been some preliminary discussions and review of options. And certainly it does appear that it may be in the ACT's interest to explore these grants and loans; noting the general infrequency of which these recovery grants and loans are activated versus the cost to maintain the corporate knowledge and systems, and having them ready to go. That may be better placed by having someone  
15 that uses them far more regularly delivering on the ACT's behalf should the government determine that that policy decision would be the best option.

20 MS DOVEY: How did the use of QRIDA come up? Was it something where the ACT went to QRIDA and asked? Did QRIDA offer its help?

MR BURKEVICS: I think it was one of those very productive discussions that occurred through the Community Outcomes and Recovery Subcommittee, as I mentioned earlier. I was talking to my counterpart in Queensland about some of the challenges that we viewed we had, the ACT had, around the delivery of grants once  
25 they had been activated. And my colleague in Queensland kindly recommended that QRIDA may be able to assist with that matter. That led on to subsequent discussions and the agreement. So I think it is a good news story in terms of collaboration that has led to an improved outcome for a disaster-affected community.

30 MS DOVEY: Yes. Thank you.

MR BURKEVICS: So I thank my colleague in that regard.

35 MS DOVEY: Yes. Another challenge that you've addressed at page 0009 of the response in the third paragraph down, is that the ACT - my apologies, can we bring up all of paragraph 8, the top three - that the ACT doesn't have formalised monitoring and evaluation arrangements for recovery frameworks. You've noted the availability of the monitoring and evaluation framework, the national one, but you've said that:

40

*"Retaining understanding and the ability to implement this complex document remains a challenge."*

45 Would you like to speak to the challenges in your jurisdiction of having that framework?

MR BURKEVICS: Thank you. The - the monitoring and evaluation framework, I first gained knowledge of several years ago through an Australian Government coordinated body to - in the training of people nationally and the exposure to that. I think there has been limited ongoing focus on the monitoring and evaluation  
5 framework; and particularly within a small jurisdiction such as the ACT where it is used very, very infrequently, it is quite a complex document and maintaining common knowledge --

MS DOVEY: Can you describe --  
10

MR BURKEVICS: -- to do it.

MS DOVEY: Sorry. Can you describe the ways in which it's complex?

15 MR BURKEVICS: I think it was - it's an academic document and I think the - from my understanding, designing the - maintaining an understanding, particularly when it's used so infrequently is very, very challenging. So it's quite a robust sophisticated document of academic standard. But, of course, when you've got people that are  
20 using it very, very infrequently, it can be quite a challenge to maintain corporate knowledge. So I think there is - there is opportunity to look at how that document is framed and other ways to undertake monitoring and evaluation.

And I suppose that's formal - of course, that's a formal process that most - sometimes the most effective forms of monitoring and evaluation is by talking to  
25 disaster-affected communities and getting their feedback. And that's something the ACT Government has placed a high degree of focus on, by receiving feedback from those businesses and disaster-affected communities and, of course, receiving and responding to their needs directly.

30 MS DOVEY: Yes. Can I turn back to - we discussed the issue with smoke that happened during this bushfire season, and I think we can all acknowledge Canberra was hard hit, and we saw the news reports around that. Could we go to page 0018 where you discuss the effects of the smoke? Can you just discuss in a little bit more  
35 detail the situation in terms of any recovery support for businesses that suffered economic impacts as a result of that smoke disruption?

MR BURKEVICS: So the smoke was - the smoke was significant for weeks on end in the ACT and across Canberra. It had a significant impact on the - on business  
40 activity, as is mentioned there in the evidence. As many, many shops, outdoor businesses, child care centres, simply it was just too hazardous to undertake outdoor activities and, as a result, they suffered a loss of income. Now, in response to this, the economic development area within the ACT Government established links to those businesses and any - anyone seeking support as a result of the smoke impacts  
45 and discussed options not only through the ACT but other options, to provide economic and other support that was available from the smoke.

I also could mention that the category B grants and loans provided - provides options as well for businesses that did experience challenges during that time to apply for funding, concessional loans as well, to assist with their economic impacts.

5 MS DOVEY: Have the majority of businesses that suffered that impact, they haven't received any funding support to date, have they?

MR BURKEVICS: What I will say is that all of those businesses that have applied for economic relief through the category B loans have been successful. And, of  
10 course, the policy guidelines were broadened for those loans to take into account the impacts of COVID as well. There is work going on at the moment --

MS DOVEY: Do you know --

15 MR BURKEVICS: Sorry, go ahead.

MS DOVEY: Do you know how many businesses have applied and been successful?

MR BURKEVICS: From evidence, it is three businesses that have applied, taken the  
20 opportunity. And, from memory, the total loan provisions as a result were over 600,000. And there's one - one business that has applied for a grant under category C but that was as a result of direct bushfire impact.

MS DOVEY: Yes. Okay. You've mentioned in --  
25

MR BURKEVICS: And there are still some opportunities to obviously - there are still opportunities to businesses to - to apply those - that has not closed.

MS DOVEY: Yes. You've mentioned a number of times in your response that the  
30 ACT is fully self-insured and, therefore, is not able to access the Build Back Better provisions of the DRFA. Can you please explain that situation, in what respect the self-insurance means that there's no ability to access that part of the DRFA?

MR BURKEVICS: So it's an interesting - interesting policy conundrum of the  
35 DRFA. Under the DRFA, the activation particularly impacts on category C. Any repair of essential public infrastructure has Build Back Better provisions within it. The ACT is a fully self-insured Territory and, as a result, probably is unlikely to access the category B provisions of the DRFA. Now, this may mean that the ACT is limited in being able to access the Build Back Better provisions of the DRFA.  
40

So, as a result of its self-insurance, there could be limited opportunity for the Australian Government and the ACT to work together to identify areas to improve bushfire resilience, particularly in, for example, Namadgi National Park, to recover that park to be more resilient to bushfire and to recover more quickly in the future.  
45 So that does appear to be a policy issue within the DRFA that for the ACT's own self-insurance arrangements, it's then precluded from being able to access the Build Back Better provisions.

MS DOVEY: Okay. Thank you. Can we please go to 0008? And under the heading Small Disaster Criterion in the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. You raise here the effect of a hard threshold in the DRFA. Can you please explain the effect of this on the ACT, by comparison with other jurisdictions?

MR BURKEVICS: Thank you. The small disaster criterion in the DRFA is a set financial threshold that you - that States and Territories must exceed before the DRFA can be activated. In a small jurisdiction such as the ACT it can sometimes take weeks, or days or weeks to determine whether the DRFA - that threshold has been - has been met. So, as a result, the ACT adopts a cautious approach before activating the DRFA. Our experience, I think, over recent years is that that small disaster criterion could therefore be an unnecessary barrier to activating or requesting to activate the DRFA with confidence.

So the - in terms of the initial smoke, as I mentioned before, there was no provision for the ACT to activate DRFA - pardon me. And after that there was that query of whether the ACT had reached its threshold once - once the relief centres were activated at Dickson, there was then that query of whether the ACT had reached the threshold to activate. So I think our experience over the bushfires would indicate that that small disaster criterion may be potentially a barrier, particularly to small jurisdictions to activating the DRFA with confidence and quickly.

MS DOVEY: Yes. Over the page to 0009, the first dot point under question 9, you've referred to the opinion that there's likely to be benefit to either maintain the NBRA covering all hazards, or bolster the resources within EMA. Can you speak to the benefit that you see to the ACT of having a body such as that, and please also talk about why you consider it's important that it not be limited to natural disasters, but that it should cover all hazards?

MR BURKEVICS: Thank you. Well, I think maybe starting with the last question first, I think there should always be, well, expectation by the public, by the community that irrespective of the type of disaster, whether it be terrorism, bushfire, hail, smoke, COVID, that all governments are able to respond quickly in terms of recovery effort; and so that that should be consistent.

I think there is - from our experience, there was quite a degree of benefit of the work undertaken by the National Bushfire Recovery Agency; obviously stood up quite quickly from zero to help coordinate matters. We certainly view that there was a lot of good work done, particularly around the development of the guidelines to support the nationally consistent grant and loan programs. And so an agency that continues that work and embeds it and, most importantly, maintains it prior to future events, it will be very, very important that we don't let all the good work that has been done to establish grants and loans programs that is and all the associated guidelines that is go with it slowly fade away.

So I think there is certainly a role for an ongoing body. Whether it is a separate agency or whether it's embedded into Emergency Management Australia would be helpful. I think there has been some unique challenges between Emergency Management Australia as the policy arm for the DRFA versus the National Bushfire Recovery Agency. I think it's important that moving forward there will be - there is a one stop shop, whatever it is, that has all recovery policy and associated matters.

So the - yes, the grants - the grants and loans: again, the ACT maintains a small number of relief guidelines which - which we look for opportunities to expand. And certainly our experiences over the past summer have identified some further opportunities to invest in expanding those guidelines and to work on a national - potentially a national set of grants and loans programs that - that can be potentially customised to the individual needs of the State and Territory as well. So they, whilst they can be consistent, there is a need to ensure that their community fit is appropriate. And so there does need to be a degree of flexibility which we have - which the ACT is still working to achieve with a \$10,000 small business grant as well.

MS DOVEY: I'm going to ask the Commissioners if they have any questions for you.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: No. That has been very comprehensive. You've asked all the questions I had. Commissioner Bennett?

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: I only have one. You raised some matters about the monitoring and evaluation framework and some of the difficulties arising with that. Are you aware of whether or not there is at the moment a re-evaluation or there is work being done by the NBRA or EMA as to re-examining the potential for the next round? I mean to look again at criteria, pre-planning for disasters, so that - this would also deal with one of your other aspects - a pre-planning arrangement so that things can be ready to go much more than they were this time?

MR BURKEVICS: Thank you, Commissioner. I think - I'm not aware of any immediate review of the monitoring and evaluation framework. I think the fact that as a result of the bushfires we saw quite a degree of things that were waived to activate the grants and loans probably shows that is they're not in the best interests of the timely delivery of recovery services. And so I'm not aware of any immediate work happening, but certainly I think to come up with a monitoring and evaluation process that is standing relatively easy to use, I think would certainly be of assistance.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Commissioner Macintosh?

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Thanks, Chair. Thanks Mr Burkevics. You just mentioned a \$10,000 small business grant. You're referring there to the Commonwealth's Small Business Bushfire Recovery Grant?

MR BURKEVICS: That's - that's correct. The ACT continues to discuss with the Commonwealth a means that that can be activated to apply to the primary producers in the ACT. An issue that we've identified is the primary producers which are rural leaseholders, and there's a very, very small number of them, are likely to fall through the eligibility criteria. So they're not generating over 50 per cent of their income from primary producer activities. They're also unlikely to be eligible for the small business, the \$50,000 grant, as that grant precludes the use of that funding for farming activities.

So, as a means to avoid that community, and who - who did suffer bushfire impact on their properties, to avoid them falling through the cracks, we continue to talk to the Australian Government about looking at means to apply the \$10,000 grant on a restricted area basis.

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: So just --

MR BURKEVICS: So that would provide them with a lower threshold and different standards of eligibility to apply.

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Right. And just for my purposes, does the small business, the \$10,000 grant program, is that confined to primary producers or does that apply to non-primary producers? My interest is, I'm curious as to why there weren't more small businesses in the ACT that put up their hands for grant assistance as opposed to loan assistance, and then why they haven't been extended this sort of help that has - I think in Indigo they mentioned to us that small businesses there have access to?

MR BURKEVICS: The initial activation was the \$75,000 and \$50,000 primary producer and small business grants as well as the concessional loan. So both the ACT and the Australian Government remain in discussion about the best way to activate the \$10,000 small business grant that provides necessary relief to those, in particular those that did suffer bushfire impact on their properties and suffered damage as well.

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Okay. Thanks Chair. One other, just quickly if I might. Sorry. I should have been prepared for that. On page 7, you've mentioned that:

*"In 2019, the ACT deployed a team of 20 social recovery staff to assist Queensland."*

Is there - I'm curious in that, just because it seems funny for a small jurisdiction like the ACT to lend resources to a large jurisdiction like Queensland. Was that part of staff training and how did that come about?

MR BURKEVICS: Thank you, Commissioner. As discussed earlier, so that mechanism is provided for under the MOU that's attached to the evidence of the

ACT. It provides a means for any State or Territory that is requiring additional resources to support recovery needs, noting the expertise that is required, that can call upon other States and Territories. Perhaps thankfully, the ACT, being mainly disaster free, is in a very, very good position to support other States and Territories with not only their response but relief and recovery needs.

So as a result of the Queensland, that significant incident up there, there was - I understand a national request for assistance and the ACT, as part of that, sent staff that are trained to undertake recovery duties up to Queensland. And as I mentioned earlier, that experience and the lessons learnt that those staff brought back would be very, very unlikely to be experienced in the ACT. So certainly the ACT views that is a very, very effective means for national collaboration around recovery assistance and provides a means to develop capability within those jurisdictions that don't have to undertake that activity frequently.

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Fantastic. Thanks for that. Thank you for your evidence too. Thanks, Chair.

MS DOVEY: I just have two quick questions by way of clarification arising out of those. First, in relation to the question of evaluation and monitoring, I just wanted to clarify, is there any external evaluation process or body that the ACT uses or has used in the past to evaluate recovery support processes?

MR BURKEVICS: I could only comment on my sphere of observation, if you like. So I couldn't talk about other areas of government, what they may have done within specific recovery needs; for example, asbestos task force. That sort of - that sort of recovery - recovery effort. But I'm not aware of any application of a monitoring and evaluation beyond sort of informal mechanisms. However, there may be occasions where formal reviews have been undertaken. But certainly I can't comment on those, unfortunately.

MS DOVEY: And then, just for the record, can we please bring up HAF.8001.0001.0738. I just wanted to confirm that this is the inter-jurisdictional assistance community recovery guide, that this is the document that you've been referring to in the answer to Commissioner Macintosh's questions?

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: And just while that's --

MR BURKEVICS: That's correct.

MS DOVEY: Sorry.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: No, while that's up, I didn't ask it, but that's the document that has been referred to by various titles and come up through various States in different versions. But I think that's, from what we can understand, that's the definitive one. So it's good to put that up, everyone can see it and baseline us. Yes, sorry?

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: There is a 2020 version, Chair.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: There is. Actually, no --

5

MS DOVEY: Sorry, can I --

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: -- it was endorsed in 2020. It was actually drafted in 2019, I think is what it was.

10

MS DOVEY: Sorry. So this one is the 2019 one. You make a very good observation. If we could please go back to the ACT notice response at page 0145. Mr Burkevics, this is the version attached to your response, and this is the 2020one, is that right?

15 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: There we go. That's the one we think is the definitive document. That's right.

MS DOVEY: There we go. Okay. So for the record, that's where it is. Now, I have no further questions for this witness. And if the Commissioners have no further, can we just check that the parties with leave have no questions. No, they do not.

20

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: No.

MS DOVEY: In that case, Commissioners, could Mr Burkevics please be released from his summons?

25

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Mr Burkevics, thank you very much. And again, apologies for the delay today, but we do appreciate your evidence, it was great. And we appreciate also how you've talked about the sharing outside the ACT. It has helped clarify a few issues for us as well. Thank you very much. Ms Dovey.

30

MR BURKEVICS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Commissioners.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: And you may be released from your summons.

35

MS DOVEY: Thank you. Now, our next witness is scheduled for 3.15 pm.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. So let's go 1515 Canberra time, 1315 WA time, and we will talk to Western Australia. Thank you.

40

**<ADJOURNED 2:54 PM>**

**<RESUMING 3:15 PM>**

45 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Ms Dovey, the run to the line. You have the gong.

MS DOVEY: Thank you. Next up, we're going to hear from Western Australia. I would like to call Mr Mal Cronstedt AFSM, Deputy Commissioner, Strategy and Emergency Management, Department of Fire and Emergency Services.  
Mr Cronstedt, hello.

5

MR CRONSTEDT: Yes, good afternoon.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Mr Cronstedt, thank you for joining us this afternoon. We appreciate the flexibility you have given us.

10

MR CRONSTEDT: No trouble at all.

MS DOVEY: Mr Cronstedt will take an affirmation.

15 <MAL CRONSTEDT, AFFIRMED>

MS DOVEY: To begin with, would you explain your role as it relates to natural disasters to the Commissioners?

20 MR CRONSTEDT: Yes, certainly. My position is one of two Deputy Commissioners within Western Australia that covers a portfolio of recovery. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services runs a Recovery Branch, and administers the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements for Western Australia.

25 MS DOVEY: Thank you very much. First of all, I would just like to quickly have a look at the scale of natural disasters over the last year in Western Australia. To do that, can we please bring up map, document at PID.001.001.0004 and this is a document that was provided by the Western Australian Department of Primary Industry and Regional Development, pursuant to a notice.

30

MR CRONSTEDT: Yes.

35 MS DOVEY: To your knowledge this is set out, in general terms, the kinds of natural disasters that arose over the past year in Western Australia, including in red, the fire scars for the bushfires, and then up towards, near Carnarvon, we can see some blue, which according to that map the Gascoyne flood warning stations; is that right?

40 MR CRONSTEDT: Yes, that's correct and they both represent an overview.

MS DOVEY: Yes. And you may have seen the evidence of Peter Fitchat from the Shire of Dundas. The fire that he was talking about was the Norseman Complex, which is the one that we can sort of see down towards the lower right-hand corner of the map; is that right?

45

MR CRONSTEDT: Yes, that's correct.

MS DOVEY: Yes. Thank you very much. Now, I thank you for preparing the response to the Notice to Give Information in relation to recovery. That document is at FES.007.001.0002. And, Mr Cronstedt, I would ask you to just start please by giving a brief overview of recovery coordination in Western Australia, including the key recovery bodies, and perhaps --

MR CRONSTEDT: Certainly.

MS DOVEY: Sorry, just to assist you, I will just ask the operator to go to the page at \_0003 which has the diagram that you've provided in the response.

MR CRONSTEDT: Okay. So recovery in Western Australia is premised on being locally led but State supported. The diagram illustrates the full range of mechanisms that might be invoked across a major recovery operation and the reporting relationships. So there's a whole statutory policy, planning framework that encompasses how that is constructed and how it works and how it's applied, including guidelines, templates and a whole bunch of mechanisms in support of that.

So, to go through the sequence, I guess, which would probably best illustrate how it fits together, is a Local Government is required to have local emergency management arrangements in place which incorporate recovery arrangements. So they've got to think about what recovery means and how to apply it, and as a State we provide support to we understand and build that up. They most appoint a local recovery coordinator, someone who can undertake leadership in that role. So that's the planning phase, and we expect that all exists throughout Western Australia at each Local Government.

And, of course, the State level, we have a - the department has a State Recovery Unit, a business unit, that specialises in this and also administers the financial arrangements that provides for support, State-wide to Local Governments as and when needed. So should a fire or flood or whatever natural hazard impact a Local Government, the local recovery coordinator stands up. They may invoke a local emergency coordination group. And so this is assuming the incident has been dealt with, of course, and we're now into recovery phase. And then, as things develop, the State, we keep a very close eye on what happens at the local level, and we assist and support the locals in their recovery endeavour.

It's important to note the recovery, of course, starts well before sort of a formal recovery coordinator might take charge. And it's - we really emphasise that it has got to be locally led, but also at start at the response phase. So it's not an afterthought, it's not a tack on. And often it is the case that we appoint a deputy incident controller just for recovery, so it's considered well and truly early in an impact phase of whatever the emergency is. So we've got a local recovery coordinator. We may have a committee set up to corral matters at that local level, supported by the State.

MS DOVEY: Can I just --

MR CRONSTEDT: The hazard impact --

MS DOVEY: Sorry, can I just ask a question? Your response say that obviously it starts and it's driven from the local area up, but then at a certain point in time your  
5 State level recovery support is necessary, another layer of State support will kick in. And my question is: how is it determined when State support is necessary? Is that driven entirely by the Local Government or is that something that the State itself informs itself of?

10 MR CRONSTEDT: So we work very closely with the Local Government and, because of the relationships that have already been built up through our network of people in the regions and so on, we have a pretty good indication of when Local Governments, same with small Local Governments are having trouble coping. So in  
15 most cases, we would simply in a supportive role, albeit it might be a phone call, it might be a visit, it might be building an entire team behind the locals.

So we use that intelligence to build up our support as necessary to help the locals. When it becomes beyond one Local Government, say it impacts several Local Governments and the State would take a greater interest, and it may - the incident  
20 may be of such a scale that the State emergency coordinator or the agency in control of the fire has, on an operational side, a greater system and greater mechanism in support of the actual response. That gives us clues about what we need to put in place for the recovery as well.

25 So, ultimately, the State would decide at the State level whether it was beyond a particular Local Government or Local Governments to cope with, and it may invoke a State emergency - rather, State Recovery Coordination Group which is simply the State mechanisms getting together to support the local effort. And a State - we have a State Recovery Coordinator whose day-to-day job it is to keep on track of these  
30 things. And ultimately, as is the case now with COVID-19 and the case with a handful of bushfires in the past, our history, that we appoint a State Recovery Controller who would then predominantly act in a facilitatory and sort of supportive role to Local Governments.

35 But, at the end of the day, the State may invoke a mechanism where the State Recovery Controller has a greater say and collaborates across Local Governments and their locals. But even in the worst circumstances, it's true to say that locals are very much in charge of their own destiny. But, of course, if it covers more than one Local Government or it's in a remote area and Local Governments are really having  
40 trouble coping, the State will build its support accordingly.

MS DOVEY: Yes. It's a process that puts significant responsibility on Local Councils which is consistent with a desire to have locally led recovery. What sort of processes are in place to ensure that the Local Councils have sufficient training  
45 management resources to deal with that level of responsibility?

MR CRONSTEDT: So the department has a network of what we call district emergency management advisers who are specialists in emergency management generally, and are in touch with their respective Local Governments and appointed recovery controllers, and it is their job to build capability among Local Governments.  
5 So it would be fair to say that some Local Governments, a fire of the magnitude of the one that you illustrated, are a once-in-a-lifetime event. So it's really hard to prepare for those sorts of things.

10 So we rely on the locals to provide the local context, the local inputs, the local networks and so forth, but the specialists can be wheeled in behind them, and our people centrally, who can then travel to the field whose day-to-day job it is to understand this intimately, have greater technical and wherewithal and better, greater expertise to support the locals. So it's an ongoing journey from our day-to-day liaison with the individuals to build their ability and their knowledge and their exposure. But  
15 at the end of the day, with some of the events, it is a once-in-a-lifetime event and we have specialists centrally located to assist, support and provide that technical backup.

MS DOVEY: In the map we saw earlier, there was flooding up towards the north. Do you know if that flooding is the result of cyclones? Is that something that happens on  
20 a regular basis?

MR CRONSTEDT: Yes, Western Australia, as the map illustrated, is a vast State and covers every kind of sort of climate that you can imagine, and the distances are absolutely enormous. And the north of the State tends to have regular floodings  
25 events, so fire, cyclones or lows - some lows turn into cyclones, others don't. But, in any event, there's widespread flooding. And it's a regular event for Western Australia to have flooding events that damage critical - essential public infrastructure, such as, you know, the really long and elongated remote roads and so on. So it's not an usual event.

30 MS DOVEY: Yes. And so would it be fair to say that the Councils up there have more consistent experience in dealing with recovery from natural disaster type events than perhaps some of the other ones that might get affected by a bushfire only occasionally?

35 MR CRONSTEDT: It would be true to say that, of course. And going back to my earlier point about the recovery starts at response, so, many of the Local Governments in the north of our State, the Kimberley and the Pilbara are very accustomed to cyclones and flooding events, and have finely tuned systems  
40 processes and supporting mechanisms, and we're there with them, to deal with those matters from a response perspective. But there is no artificial line between response and recovery. It starts at the beginning. So whatever you do in response slowly morphs into standing communities back on their feet and getting things back to as normal as possible. So it is quite an integrated mechanism. And then our recovery  
45 team comes in at the same time and supports that. So very accustomed, and it's probably the most frequent impact that we have in Western Australia, certainly on essential public infrastructure in the form of roads and the like.

MS DOVEY: Yes, certainly. I note at page \_0002 of the response at reference 3, it sets out that:

5 *"Western Australia does not have its own recovery funded program."*

I assume - would you speak to that and how disaster recovery funding operates within Western Australia, both in accordance with the DRFA and then, if the DRFA is not activated, what might be available?

10

MR CRONSTEDT: Certainly. By saying we don't have a recovery program, there's not one invoked as a result of the disasters we're experiencing. We have a business unit. We have an agency - agency resources that - we have a team. We have a strategy and we have strategies in place, and so forth, that deliver recovery services. So when it says there that we don't have its own recovery funded program, that's in the sense of one design to meet a particular need, such as that being experienced in the east now.

15

20 So we have a central unit which not only provides services to our network of district of emergency management advisers to Local Governments and others, but we also provide similar services and a network to our peer agencies such as Main Roads, Department of Communities and others. So we have a more integrated approach to delivery of recovery of building capacity among Local Governments. We also, as a department, administer the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements which is one element for this whole strategy of delivering on better recovery for local communities.

25

MS DOVEY: At pages \_0012 to 0013 at reference 25, you've noted that the fires in the most recent season did not meet the - perhaps we could expand reference 25 and then overleaf as well:

30

*"The fires did not meet the threshold for activation of the DRFA. They nonetheless had a significant impact on local community and industries."*

35 Now, in that circumstance, there has been no federal funding that has come to assist those communities. Can you describe to what extent the Western Australian Government has been able to provide support and what kinds of support might have been provided?

40 MR CRONSTEDT: So, using that Norseman Complex example, the department and our partner agencies from Land Management and Communities, and so forth, have been with that Local Government from the outset. So we've been on the journey to prevention, preparedness, response and recovery with that - with that Local Government and its communities. So the support, and as I mentioned earlier, recovery doesn't start as a discrete endeavour necessarily, it starts at the beginning of the journey.

45

And so, regardless of any Commonwealth support or meeting any thresholds for Commonwealth assistance, the department was intimately involved in managing the fire, dealing with the consequences of the fire, and working in partnership to develop ultimately an impact statement when the fires were controlled and described the impacts and what needs to happen from that point on. So that's the continuum, I guess, from beginning to end and the support we do regardless.

In that particular instance - and, of course, we would recognise the impacts to that Local Government and the disruption to continuity of business and the main road, and the stress and anxiety that it causes to locals in those - during that fire. But we're there to support them all along through that journey. And, as you point out, it didn't meet the threshold which currently is \$220,000 for tangible impacts to essential public infrastructure. So it had impacts in other ways. And I guess later on we could discuss, you know, some of the thresholds and some of the criteria that might apply, and some of our thoughts concerning improvements in that area.

MS DOVEY: I'm happy--

MR CRONSTEDT: But I --

MS DOVEY: I'm happy for you to go to that now --

MR CRONSTEDT: Yes.

MS DOVEY: -- if you would like to discuss those matters that you've raised.

MR CRONSTEDT: So the threshold is \$240,000 for Commonwealth support. And, as I mentioned, we're there anyway for the journey in recovery and helping. And ultimately, the beginning of the journey after recovery is that impact statement which I understand has been tendered in evidence, and you have. So that impact statement describes what has been impacted across the various domains, you know, environmental, infrastructure and so on, and what - and some next steps - describe the next steps. Our expectation is that that would then be incorporated into business as usual of DFES and land management agencies and others, to then take that up and pursue whatever needs to be done to effect a proper recovery.

In terms of improvement for access to DRFA, I think it's not so much the threshold itself: it's how we come to the threshold. So how do we actually assess what's damaged and what impacts there have been that then contribute to triggering support mechanisms, and the support measures. So many of them, or all of them currently rely on quantifiable and tangible impacts, such as damage to the main roads or damage to, you know, something that you can count.

We feel that there - it would be useful to examine the less tangible things that have impact. For instance, in the Norseman Complex, the road was disrupted for 12 days, you know, one of our lifelines to the east, the roadway at least - and there still remains the railway, of course - but the roadway for 12 days was impacted. So it

would be - it would be good to be able to get a handle, a better handle and have some criteria that could contribute to building a case for eligibility for supports that aren't - that are less tangible.

5 So a business disruption, for instance, or perhaps criteria related to the size and  
extent of the natural hazard impact, or some other criteria. So we're party to a review  
of the DRFA at the moment, as I know others have spoken to, and we're exploring  
what we could do to better quantify some of those criteria that then would trigger the  
10 supports necessary to help those remote communities, such as the Shire of Dundas  
and Norseman, more effectively next time round.

MS DOVEY: To that end, do you see that there would be benefit in a protocol at a national level for the collection of impact data?

15 MR CRONSTEDT: I think it would be useful, and I know it would be useful to have  
criteria or standardisation of some sort, or at least principle-based policy at the  
national level, which then could be supported by standards concerning the sharing of  
data and information, and some metrics that we could all agree would be reasonable  
ones that might contribute to criteria and thresholds. I guess that would be a sensible  
20 thing.

I know that the current - as I mentioned earlier, the DRFA is under review, so we're  
hoping to input some of that - some of those thoughts. But yes, if we could agree on  
a - nationally on a principle-based policy, some standards that might accompany that,  
25 and then as a collaborative effort in the Federation, of course, we could then use that  
to benefit us all and trigger some of those things more - earlier and more effectively.

MS DOVEY: Yes.

30 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Ms Dovey, I just want to take that a little bit further  
while we're on that, on this discussion. We're currently looking at DRFA and  
discussing down that, and I just need to try and clarify for the Commissioners how  
Western Australia works. And so, if I understand it from your submission and the  
public submissions we got from a number of people in Western Australia who were  
35 affected by bushfire during the 2019-2020 season, and were disappointed, would  
probably a multi-syllable word, that they didn't qualify for any funding. Your answer  
goes down: well, because you didn't qualify for DRFA, there's nothing.

That's not quite the approach that some other States took. Other States also provided  
40 State funding for individuals and the like that had been affected by fire. But I  
understand WA does not do that; is that right? You've talked about "We're with you  
all the way" and all that, but you're talking about working with the Local  
Government. I haven't heard you mention members of the community yet and  
individuals. You're only working across the government lines. And so a simple  
45 question: does WA ever provide direct funding to individuals affected by bushfires  
or not? Or, actually, other natural hazards, natural disasters?

MR CRONSTEDT: I can't speak for the Department of Communities, but I know, as a sort of Human Services agency, they provide supports to people who find themselves impacted by whatever it is, including natural disasters. So there's a range of sort of charities and direct Department of Communities assistance available to  
5 individuals who fall on hard times by whatever means, including being affected by bushfire. So floods and bushfires are a common feature of Western Australia. So I guess it's a fine line between, you know, to what extent do we support - you know, where do we draw the line between eligibility and what we give - you know, what we contribute to people?

10 So you're correct in saying that there's the normal - there's normal business as usual of the agencies, the Human Service agencies, and others and charities, and our support to Local Governments and their communities that carry on regardless of any eligibility for Commonwealth supports. And if the trigger is then met for a particular  
15 bushfire or impact, then a range of additional measures are provided.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. I'll just - I can see that.

20 MR CRONSTEDT: So that's all we've got.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: You're sort of talking around the issue where I'm coming from. The reason I'm asking you, if I go to the title of your response it says:

25 *"The following response to references reflects the Western Australian Government's perspective on recovery arrangements."*

30 And in your answer just then you said, "I don't know what this lot do and I don't know what that lot do in the Western Australian Government." So are you only looking at the recovery through a certain lens and you're not talking from a whole of Western Australian government view or you are talking from a whole of Western Australian government point of view?

35 MR CRONSTEDT: Well, I guess I'm talking from the agency's view and its current place in recovery. We've got - you know, we work with the Department of Communities. I guess there are areas where we could perhaps improve how we do things and how we get in earlier or provide individual supports. But we administer what we administer, which is the DRFA. And we provide, you know, links to charities and other things. And Local Governments are responsible for their  
40 particular patch and we support them.

45 So I guess that's what we provide at the moment. And we don't - we don't necessarily have - though, I've got to say that one of the things that we're working to do is, I guess - and Yarloop fire in 2016 really taught us a few lessons - is that having a one stop shop or something equivalent, so people could just have one exposure to one person to seek, you know, the whole range of supports for them. But the focus at the moment, I think, is that we - we provide recovery on a normal day-to-day business --

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes.

5 MR CRONSTEDT: -- basis. And then, when something bad happens that meets a threshold or is larger, we then provide increasing supports to scale to the policy that we currently have.

10 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: No, where I'm coming from is what we're trying to do is get an understanding nationally what support is available to communities and individuals, businesses, Local Governments and the like. What I'm trying to get an understanding of in Western Australia, are we missing a piece in the response that we need to seek, or - and in this case, it's how the State responds to members of the State, so communities in the State, not just Local Governments in response to natural  
15 disasters. Because, as I said, we've had a number of public submissions that have voiced a frustration that because the DRFA - and they don't even know what DRFA, they just heard a Commonwealth announcement, of which they weren't qualified to get - because that didn't kick in, there was no money, no funding to them.

20 What I'm asking is: is there a State mechanism to provide funding within the framework of recovery, and it's a yes or no? And I think what I'm hearing is the answer is no: it's either Commonwealth or nothing or a charity kicks in. Is that the correct understanding? The same goes for businesses, by the way.

25 MR CRONSTEDT: Yes, that's right. Either we have it or we don't. I guess the Department of Communities has its own mechanisms to support people in need which we don't, as a matter of course, incorporate or think of as recovery.

30 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. All right. Thank you for that. Ms Dovey, please.

MS DOVEY: Yes. Thank you. Perhaps just to round that out --

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes, sorry about that.

35 MS DOVEY: -- I might go to page 0013 of the response in respect to small businesses, specifically at references 26 and 27. We've been discussing mostly individuals, also small businesses. Just the responses on small businesses in respect of this bushfire season is that there isn't a specific estimate of how many small  
40 businesses have been affected. And, essentially, what I understand to the answer to 27 is that specific disaster recovery support would be potentially provided to small businesses if it met the current criteria for DRFA activation, but in the absence of that there's no specific disaster recovery support for small businesses. Is that right?

45 MR CRONSTEDT: That's correct, yes.

MS DOVEY: Yes, thank you. Now, you've helpfully attached to the response a document at FES.007.001.0003 which is your Recovery Key Areas of Focus for

2019 to 2021. If we could please bring that up. My question in relation to this document is whether there's a structure for accountability against these goals? Is there a review process? If so, is it done internally or externally? How is the tracking against these key areas of focus measured?

5

MR CRONSTEDT: The State Emergency Management Committee is - you know, we report - or they receive reports on, you know, how things are tracking on a regular basis. They meet five times a year to hear about progress and then plan any subsidiary plans. There's a committee structure beneath that and one of which specifically addresses community engagement and recovery. So they have a works program. They report against the works program. So we track against that. And, of course, then there's the usual governance around annual reporting and the like. So that's, essentially, how we do it.

10

15 MS DOVEY: Okay.

MR CRONSTEDT: There is the performance measures and the governance around running an agency and running programs.

20 MS DOVEY: So that's, essentially, an internal self-reporting set of measurements against this; is that right?

MR CRONSTEDT: That's correct.

25 MS DOVEY: Yes.

MR CRONSTEDT: Though, the State Emergency Management Committee also has a - has a capability framework and a - does regular - provides regular advice to the Minister and others about how the committee and how the - how those things are tracking in particular. So there is a reporting mechanism and advice to the Minister concerning how things are going. And, of course, publicly you would have to look at the annual report or, you know, the stuff on the State Emergency Management Committee website which would illustrate how things are going.

30

35 MS DOVEY: Thank you. Just one moment. Are you aware of the Victorian Inspector-General of Emergency Management assisting to build a small internal assurance group within Western Australia?

MR CRONSTEDT: No, I'm not. No.

40

MS DOVEY: I understand we heard evidence on that the other day but I won't take it any further with you. That's fine. Can we move on to the State - in a recovery space, the coordination between Western Australia and the Commonwealth. We've talked about the DRFA. Otherwise, can you describe any interaction that you've had with EMA or NBRA and how you feel that level of interaction, that coordination, works in the recovery support space?

45

MR CRONSTEDT: We've had a long relationship with EMA, and, of course, now the objectives of the new agency, and involvement all through that journey with their various governance structures and committees. So we're very aware and very involved in the developments in that area. So it's fair to say that, given the impacts on the eastern States, we've had not the depth of involvement of other jurisdictions, of course. But nevertheless we're keen to, you know, to learn from their experience but also contribute to the - contribute to moving forward and building a better recovery framework.

10 So the DRFA review is one of those interactions which we're really keen to have input into, and make sure we get into a better place down the track. So, in addition, we've got a liaison officer, great liaison officer interaction between the agencies. And we have someone in place there, we've offered support, and we've got someone in place at the moment supporting them. So a really close relationship and really understand what's going on and the mutual benefits that might arise from their work.

MS DOVEY: Can I ask the operator to go to page 000 - sorry, we're on a different document. Back to the response which is FES.007.001.0002 to page \_0004. At reference 5, the first dot point under that question, you've said that:

20 *"There's currently no formalised resource sharing arrangements between Western Australia and other State and Territories and/or the Commonwealth which solely focus on recovery."*

25 We have heard some evidence earlier about the guidelines for Inter-Jurisdictional Assistance Community Recovery prepared by the Social Recovery Reference Group. We've seen a number of iterations of that. We've seen a version dated 2019 and 2020. Perhaps we can bring up the - I have the reference to the 2019 version here which is HAF.8001.0001.0738. My question is whether you're aware of this document, and whether Western Australia has had any involvement in the preparation of it or the use of it?

MR CRONSTEDT: I've only got peripheral awareness of it. Though, in my - I know that our human services agency, the Department of Communities, has had long-held arrangements, both - largely informal as I understand it, where, given they're in the same industry they share resources and provide support to each other. So I know that has been a long-term arrangement that they've had with their equivalents in other jurisdictions. And, you know, yes, that's my understanding.

40 MS DOVEY: Okay. Is this a document you've seen before?

MR CRONSTEDT: I don't recognise the cover, but I have heard of it and I have heard discussions around it.

45 MS DOVEY: Okay. Sorry, go ahead.

MR CRONSTEDT: I was just going to say, I mean, there are other mechanisms, and perhaps what's missing is an integrated approach. Our agency is part of a - in a response phase, we have some really good and maturing arrangements over many years for sharing response arrangements. Perhaps what's missing is the link between  
5 that at an integrated approach to sharing resources for recovery also because, you know, though the health - the human services areas of got some arrangements, bringing them in an integrated fashion so that we can all contribute more usefully across jurisdictional boundaries for recovery, would be a useful endeavour.

10 MS DOVEY: Certainly. Perhaps you don't know, in which case it's fine, but I will just check: do you know if Western Australia has representatives on the Social Recovery Reference Group?

15 MR CRONSTEDT: I'm not aware, but I wouldn't be surprised that our Department of Communities wouldn't be represented.

MS DOVEY: Okay. Thank you. Now, at page 0005 the third dot point under reference 7, you've noted that Western Australia is working with the ANZEMC CoRS, I will use the acronym, on the national framework. Can I ask you  
20 whether you think there's value in having a national framework and what that would add to the coordination of recovery support?

MR CRONSTEDT: I think a - a principle-based national framework would be of great value. There has been quite a bit of work in the response area and, of course,  
25 the risk reduction area, the framework. So extending that and having an integrated approach to emergency management and having a principle-based framework that - that encompasses things such as standardised information sharing, capability buildings, sharing skills or building cadres at a national level that can be put into action across any jurisdiction, those sorts of things. But starting with a framework  
30 and a principle-based policy that then sets out what, you know, what the boundaries are and provides the guidance across that, that would be very useful.

MS DOVEY: Given that you have mentioned it, I actually had meant to take you to this, the notion of the State recovery cadres. Would you mind talking to how that  
35 program works and how that came about?

MR CRONSTEDT: Certainly. After the Yarloop fire in 2016, we - we felt one of the lessons learned from that - and a report was done after the fire - and one of the  
40 lessons was that we needed a pool of individuals that could be skilled in various disciplines and technical abilities, that could then focus their attention on building those skills, specialising in their particular endeavour, and then be available as a cadre or pool of individuals, to be swung into action in any area of the State or even interstate. So the concept was building a cadre of individuals who would have an ongoing program of development, and then be - come together from time to time,  
45 used in exercises and then swing into action when required and build that support that's necessary for Local Government and local communities.

So the State can then stand behind the locals who have the intimate knowledge of the local circumstance but we can swing the specialists who are far more familiar, far more practised and really understand their business in, behind them. And, as I said, Local Governments many times these things are a once-in-a-lifetime event. It seems  
5 sensible to build a cadre for support wherever it's required.

MS DOVEY: And is that a program that's in action at the moment, that's operational?

10 MR CRONSTEDT: It is. So we've spent a couple of years developing that, and it's maturing, getting better and better over time. So we've got people who are available now and have different specialisations, and then we can call on them, as required, to assist Local Governments and others. There haven't been too many opportunities in Western Australia, fortunately, to invoke them in any great extent, but no doubt our  
15 time will come where we need to draw on those people and then support Local Governments, particularly those of the smaller ones and the regional ones. And I guess, you know, they don't experience that stuff, that's not their daily business, we can then support them.

20 So we're really happy with the progress of the program and how it's building up capability across the State, and we have confidence that we have people available on call who we can draw on for particular specialisations in recovery.

MS DOVEY: You mentioned earlier that there was a possibility those people could be used to provide support interstate. Is that something that you've offered up or  
25 you've communicated to other States might be available?

MR CRONSTEDT: We have. In - through the NBRA and others we have done so. I know we've got one person that's currently with the NBRA. So I guess that's partly a reflection of some of our expertise and our contribution to the national effort. But we  
30 stand ready to support at any occasion, and I know our colleagues in other States would do similarly.

MS DOVEY: On that page that is currently up, if we can just go down to the following dot point under reference 7, that fourth one down, if we can just bring  
35 up - you've referred to research showing a lack of risk ownership in the community, and the response states that:

*"This results in underinsurance and poor community preparation."*

40 It further states that:

*"Education and community engagement will assist the community and businesses to understand the risk of natural disasters."*

45 And I'm just wondering if you are able to elaborate on any suggestions as to the kinds of education and community engagement that you think would be required to make change in this space?

MR CRONSTEDT: As I mentioned earlier, recovery is only one part of a bigger picture, which is that good recovery starts with the very front end, understanding the risk at the individual level and the community level, and then building that capability  
5 such that so during response and recovery people can stand back up on their feet so much more readily; they're far more resilient and capable of meeting the hazard and dealing with it. We've got - we're really of the view that we've got a community engagement program. We're trying to take an integrated approach in this department where both community engagement and recovery in the one branch, so that  
10 community engagement goes hand in hand.

So what we do with communities and what we help Local Governments and their communities and individuals build in terms of resilience and understanding the hazards and what they can do about it, then holds them in great stead down the track,  
15 so when recovery comes along it's so much easier, it's less stressful and so on. That's not a perfect - it's not perfect and we're - you know, it would be fair to say that we're not - that we haven't got it absolutely right. But we're committed to the journey of making sure that people understand their risk, take out appropriate insurance coverage, they deal with the treatments that they're able to locally, you know, the  
20 usually things that you need to do to prepare for bushfires, cyclones and floods, and then engage with their local communities so that recovery is lessened.

I mean, recovery is the back - is the bit we want to avoid. We want to avoid having people dependent and agonise and prolong recovery. We want communities, and it's  
25 a long-term goal, to build resilience among individuals and communities. And, of course, our work with Local Governments is so critical there because they really understand the people at that level; they understand their needs. And it goes back to our point about Local Government, local communities and the individuals that make them so critical to this whole endeavour, but we - we retain - I reiterate that model:  
30 the State stands behind the locals and that's how we operate.

MS DOVEY: Are you able to point to - do you think there's any specific action, specific forms of community engagement that seem to be actually making progress in this area that are resulting in higher levels of insurance or people taking higher  
35 levels of responsibility for managing their own risk?

MR CRONSTEDT: In Western Australia we've got - I mean, there's great collaboration across jurisdictions in Australia in terms of adapting programs that address particular risks, and bushfire is one of those. We have a program called  
40 FireChat here which facilitates local conversations about their local circumstances, and going through guiding people through. So: where do I live? What do I - what circumstances am I in? What are the hazards and what can I do to, you know, prepare? Have I - do I have a plan? You know, what about my insurance, is it adequate? And so on. So it steps people through that. Insurance being one element  
45 but there are many, many other elements that have got to come together to make for resilient communities.

MS DOVEY: Thank you. Commissioners, I note the time. I want to give you a chance to ask questions so I will hand over to you.

5 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: I've got one question, can we put that original map back up at the start, please. I'm just interested in us understanding what that map shows.

MS DOVEY: Sorry, one moment.

10 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: What was the --

MS DOVEY: That was PID.001.001.0004. There we are.

15 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: So that's a West Australian provided map; is that right?

MS DOVEY: That's right. This was provided by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development.

20 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: So just a question: what you have here, are they bushfires where you've enacted a recovery response? They're obviously not all of the bushfires you had during the season?

25 MR CRONSTEDT: Yes, that's right. They're not all the bushfires. There's many, many smaller bushfires that would be scattered, predominantly around the south-west corner of the State.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes.

30 MR CRONSTEDT: And I think I need to make a point that the - so, as the response is scaled up, recovery, we often appoint a deputy incident controller. So in the larger level - what we call level 2 or 3 fires, the bigger ones, we focus a bit - obviously scale it up and focus attention on having someone dedicated to thinking about recovery and what it means, and in particular drawing up the impact statement which  
35 then codifies the - you know, what's affected and what we need to do about it. So that's kind of the aim of that position and where we want to end up with, but also making sure that whatever you do in response helps you with recovery. So the map has - doesn't illustrate all those other little fires where there would be various scales of recovery, whether it's called recovery or not.  
40

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. Thank you for clarifying that. Thanks. Commissioner Bennett?

45 COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Thank you. I just want to clarify one thing with you. We've had a discussion about, I think at the beginning you explained that recovery, you've said a number of times recovery is part of the whole of - it starts with the response and it moves through to recovery and that you then utilise - part of what

you utilise is the impact statements. And we've also discussed some of the funding issues in terms of when funding for individuals is available. And you were also talking about the fact that Western Australia has been involved with the NBRA and I think you've got somebody seconded to the NBRA. So I want to clarify, if I might, just one part of the answer you gave. If \_0006 could be brought up and reference 9. Right, that's it, okay. Thank you. You've come out there very strongly against a stand-alone Commonwealth agency, and you've got there:

10 *"Responsible for response and recovery in relation to all national natural disasters."*

Now, from what you've said, I understand that because of the emphasis on Local Government input and dealing with things at a local level in the response phase, strictly the response phase, if I can isolate it, you would say that that is a matter for you within the State. But I'm curious as to why you say that there should not be a stand-alone Commonwealth agency responsible for recovery? If I can put recovery into that different part of the equation. Because the NBRA, for example - I mean, are you against the NBRA?

MR CRONSTEDT: Well, the States doesn't want to see, I guess, a bureaucracy established at the Commonwealth level that would then divert resources away from where it matters in terms of local - and the States stand behind the locals and the Commonwealth is standing behind the Commonwealth - the State, rather. So I guess our emphasis is that rather - rather focus on a policy framework, some collaboration that would - and standards that might fall out of that, and bring that all together; but not - don't necessarily create an agency at the Commonwealth level which is not only not proximate to the impacts, but may divert resources away from where it really matters.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Well, I'm just looking at the different attitudes about what happens at the recovery phase and the fact, for example, you said with business loss and matters such as that, that the State doesn't provide funding and there could be a situation where, as has happened, where you don't get to the stage of being to activate the existing forms of Commonwealth funding. Would you disband the NBRA or would you have never have set it up? If it was your decision would you have never set up the NBRA as far as Western Australia is concerned?

MR CRONSTEDT: Well, I guess what the Commonwealth sets up is a matter for the Commonwealth.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: No, no, no, I'm asking not what the Commonwealth sets up. You've said Western Australia does not support a stand-alone Commonwealth agency. Now, I understand what you say with responsibility for response. I understand your position on that. What I don't comprehend is why you say that there should not be a stand-alone agency at all at the Commonwealth level for dealing strictly with recovery - and we're talking about the sorts of recovery, not so much talking about the building of roads - but provision of support to individuals affected by it.

Now, I don't comprehend why you say there's no role for such an agency. Let's say that such an agency brought in principles of jurisdiction, neutral provision of funding for affected Australians, and some of those Australians are Western Australians.

5 Would you say that there was no role for standards to be brought in or criteria to be brought in that should be applicable to Western Australians?

MR CRONSTEDT: Well, I think - I think standards and principle-based policy and all the, you know, resources behind that, I guess what we're - what we're fearful of is a large stand-alone agency that might divert resources. It's as simple as that, I think. It's just that, you know, the Commonwealth can establish a structure and a mechanism to do all the things necessary for establishing a policy, establishing standards, providing supporting mechanisms to the States and so on, but I guess we're just fearful that the establishment of a Commonwealth agency might divert, unnecessarily create another - yet another agency. We've got EMA and we've got, you know, those mechanisms. We prefer simply to build on the good we've got.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: Well, just one more if I can take it that way. You said you're happy to have a Commonwealth agency deal with provision of principles and standards and matters such as that. What about eligibility criteria for Commonwealth funded recovery programs?

MR CRONSTEDT: Well, that could be one of the things that's invoked. I guess there's two issues here. One is the - what you - what is produced in terms of policy and standards and provisions and supports and measures and so on, and how it's done. So I guess what we're railing against is the how, and the resources that might accompany the how.

COMMISSIONER BENNETT: I see. Well, I think I understand the position. Thank you for clarifying that. That's very helpful.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Commissioner Macintosh?

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Yes, just quickly. Thanks for your time. In the document, I will pull up to start, 08 if I could, you've made reference to the National Impact Assessment Model and previously you were talking about how the processes for collection of data could be improved by some standardisation of what is collected and the form in which it is collected. And I just wondered whether you could comment on whether there's - or there seems to be gaps in the National Impact Assessment Model, if you could provide comment on that. Is the National Impact Assessment Model, of which I have not seen, is the type of data that is collected under that too high a level? What are the gaps in that process at the moment?

MR CRONSTEDT: I'm not an expert in the NIAM itself but, as I understand it, and NIAM prescribed metadata, in other words, data about data - the features of the data you're trying to collect. So we're supportive of that framework and we've worked to improve it over time. But, as I said, I don't know the intricacies of it, other than we

support it. We would like to see a more mature standard. And we will contribute and if we can - you know, that would be one of the things that would be quite useful.

5 COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Yes, that sounds like at the moment it's a metadata standard and what we're looking for is more of the micro and the meso level stuff, so you give specific directions on what you should collect on particular things so we have standardisation?

10 MR CRONSTEDT: Yes.

COMMISSIONER MACINTOSH: Yes. Great. Thank you very much. Nothing more, Chair.

15 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Thank you very much. Ms Dovey?

MS DOVEY: I understand we have nothing from parties with leave; no one has asked to say anything. And I have no further questions. So may Mr Cronstedt please be released from his summons?

20 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Mr Cronstedt may be released from his summons. Thank you for joining us this afternoon, and once again, thanks for your flexibility and for your forthright responses. We appreciate that very much.

25 MR CRONSTEDT: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Commissioners.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Chair, I have a couple of housekeeping matters, if I may?

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes, you may.

30 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Before Ms Dovey introduces the final video witness?

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes, please.

35 MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: Or reintroduces, I should say. First up, I want to give an update on the balance of responses by States and Territories to the Commissioner's Notices to Give Information. I said at transcript 1479 that I would tender during the course of this week that mass of material. I'm advised that the de-duplication and supplementation process is nearly complete, but I will defer that tender until next week.

40 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. So we will do that Monday before we start.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: When we have that, yes.

45 COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: The second matter is at transcript 1480 I also said tender I would tender the responses to the Firefighting Issues Paper as soon as the responses from key stakeholders have been processed. I'm advised that the Royal Commission has received the submission of the State of Victoria but is still awaiting the response of the State of New South Wales. So I will also defer that tender.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. Thank you.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: The third matter is that the witness list for next week, I understand, is in the process of being uploaded to the website. The - I said then that we would be calling the current emergency agency leaders from next Wednesday. Now, due to - just one moment - in light of the recent surge in COVID-19 cases in Victoria, the State of Victoria has advised that Commissioner Crisp, who is the head of the Emergency Management Victoria, is currently experiencing significantly increased operational demands in his role coordinating Victoria's pandemic response.

Noting the considerable diversion of resources by EMV and other agencies in responding to this crisis, his ability to give evidence before the Commission is now significantly constrained. We have accepted the request that he not be required next Wednesday - so on 16 July, and that Deputy Commissioner Stephenson would attend and we would propose to make arrangements, if possible, for a subsequent date for Commissioner Crisp's appearance.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: No, I understand what's happening in Victoria at the moment and we can be a bit flexible to cover that. Although if there are questions that come out of it that only he can answer then we will look to pursue that down track. That's okay.

MS HOGAN-DORAN SC: And that is the only other matter. Thank you, Chair.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay. Ms Dovey, you're going to introduce the video?

MS DOVEY: Well, I am.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Okay.

MS DOVEY: I did introduce the video this morning. I probably won't repeat all of what I said. I will just reiterate that we're going to hear from Jenny and Arthur Robb. They're small business people from Kiah outside of Eden, New South Wales. A large part of their business was tourism, largely from Victoria. Obviously the current situation with COVID-19 will have affected that area even more severely than when we spoke with them.

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: Yes.

MS DOVEY: The focus of this is on the impact of the fires on small businesses in the area. And, as I said earlier, the evidence has been edited and the original footage of the evidence is also available. The video runs for around 32 minutes. I ask that we play the video evidence and adjourn for the day on the conclusion of the video.

5

COMMISSIONER BINSKIN: So we will adjourn at the completion of the video and we will look to reconvene at 1330 Canberra time on Monday. And could I just take the chance to thank you for all your efforts and hard work as well. Really do appreciate it. You put a lot of hard yards in. We certainly couldn't get to where we were without you. So thank you.

10

MS DOVEY: Thank you.

<VIDEO PLAYED>

15

<ARTHUR ROBB, AFFIRMED>

<JENNIFER ROBB, AFFIRMED>

MS DOVEY: Jenny and Arthur, could you please each give us your name and tell us your occupation?

20

MS JENNY ROBB: Jenny Robb, tour operator.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: And Arthur Donald Robb, I used to be a concreter, now I've retired - I work for my wife.

25

MS JENNY ROBB: He works for me.

MS DOVEY: Thank you. Could you please tell us about your backgrounds? Arthur, we just had a little bit of yours. And how you came to live in Kiah and how long you've been living in the area?

30

MR ARTHUR ROBB: I moved down here 23 years ago. I spent 17 years in Brisbane and I came down here looking for a property on a river access to the ocean and this is what drove me down here, and I found it in this area and it's gone on from there.

35

MS JENNY ROBB: And I met my first husband in Sydney and he was a Davidson of the famous Davidson whaling family here; moved to Eden. We moved to Kiah with a small baby in 1982 and I lived just over the ridge from where we are now. And Arthur and I got together in the early 2000s and we got married in 2001, and so I've been on this property for 20 years, yeah.

40

MS DOVEY: Thank you. Can you tell me about the businesses that you were running before the bushfires came along; what businesses the two of you were running together?

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MS JENNY ROBB: Well, you talk about the caravans.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: Well, I - we have a large yard and we did caravan storage. That was one way of bringing income when I first arrived here. And that's been  
5 totally burnt; the shed has gone and all the fencing and that has gone now. So we just have to restructure that. And then Jen started a few other businesses up.

MS JENNY ROBB: So I had Kiah Tours running out of the property and we just established two camp sites. We've now got three because we had to look after some  
10 people who were evacuating from fires north of Batemans Bay. So we created another one but - so we had three camp sites, the kayak tours, and we also ran a walking tour in the national park south of here called Light to Light Camps on the Light to Light Walk. That business can't operate now because of the fire.

15 National Parks have advised us recently that they're not starting to re-establish the track till 2021 with a view to finishing in 2022. So in an email from National Parks with no actual name attached to it, we were advised that we had no business for the next two and a half years. So all four businesses were impacted.

20 MS DOVEY: Can you just describe the location of Kiah for those who aren't familiar with where you are in Australia?

MS JENNY ROBB: We're - our property is 11.67 kilometres south of Eden, New South Wales. Kiah is a locality, goes for another, you know, 50-odd Ks round the  
25 area. So - and there were over 45 homes destroyed in Kiah that I understand, yeah.

MS DOVEY: And you're just north of the Victorian border; is that right?

MS JENNY ROBB: Yes, about --  
30

MR ARTHUR ROBB: 50 kilometres.

MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah.

35 MS DOVEY: Okay. Can you tell us a little bit about the other kinds of businesses that are in your community?

MS JENNY ROBB: At Kiah itself there are mostly small agricultural or just, you know, home hobby farm type things. In Eden, a lot of tourism businesses, hospitality  
40 businesses. There's a small fishing fleet. There's a mussel farm. Nearly everything has a link with tourism, though, yeah.

MS DOVEY: And before this most recent season, what was your knowledge of bushfires, like your experience of bushfires?  
45

MR ARTHUR ROBB: We'd been in the RFS for close on 18 years and we hadn't seen any major fires but I've seen enough smaller fires to realise that we don't want

to be here when this big fire came through. So we protected our house as best we could and we left.

5 MS DOVEY: Yes, okay. Maybe just on that, when you say you protected your house, can you talk a little bit about the preparations that were made both on your property and in the area in advance of what looked like a bad fire season?

10 MR ARTHUR ROBB: Well, our house is concrete all the way around the house, so that sort of kept the fires away. We have a big tank above the house. We turned the tap on when we drove away to hopefully just moisten the ground a little, it seemed to work and we were just lucky; that's all it was. It's just nothing you can do with a fire like that that will save anything if it hits in the right time and the right pace. And other areas, Forestry did give them a hand. They came and knocked over trees around some of the houses. They came through asked us if we were okay. I said,  
15 "Yes, we're fine. There's nothing more we can do." And, yeah.

MS JENNY ROBB: Having the river flat helped - helped sort of just slow it a bit, I think, occasionally. Our neighbour, he - he stayed on the flat during the fire and watched the fire come up the hill. But none of the river flats seem to have burnt. So  
20 that was, sort of just slowed it down in some sections, I think, yeah. But it was so dry  
--

MS DOVEY: .....

25 MS JENNY ROBB: -- I'm surprised that that helped.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yeah.

30 MS JENNY ROBB: It was very, very dry.

MS DOVEY: Yes. Talking about the process when the fires came through, if you're comfortable doing so, would you mind just briefly describing what happened in your area and if you talk a little bit about the information you had as to the fire, where it was and what you found useful in that respect?

35 MS JENNY ROBB: Firstly, the ABC radio probably saved a lot of lives in this area. Yes, there was the Fires Near Me app but it wasn't as updated as the Victorian app. And being close to the border, it was frustrating to see on both the apps the fire looked like it had a hard edge along the border. It was ridiculous. And you know,  
40 when you don't know where the thing is - we knew it was coming. For three days we knew it was coming and we knew it was between Mallacoota and here but we didn't really know where, and that was - that was a bit - that uncertainty was a bit scary, yeah.

45 MS DOVEY: Yes. So you evacuated when you saw the fire was coming. When was that?

MS JENNY ROBB: We knew the fire was coming.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: We evacuated around lunchtime of the day --

5 MS JENNY ROBB: On the 4th of January.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: The 4th of January. Went into town down to the wharf because that's the safest place to be, and we just - just left at that and we had no idea what the fire - you couldn't see anything. The smoke was at ground level, you could  
10 only see probably about 5 metres in front of you. And that was - that was it, yep.

MS DOVEY: Knowing that the fire was coming, I understand that you had taken some of your assets off the property; is that correct?

15 MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yes.

MS JENNY ROBB: Yes.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: Anything that we made money out of, like the caravan  
20 storage, or the camper trailers, all the camping gear, all the kayaks were taken into town, put in a safe location.

MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah. We knew the fire had hit Mallacoota on the 31st of  
25 December and we had a bad day here that day and we weren't sure. And then we knew that the weather was going to change again and push it our way, you know, on the 4th. We were watching that really closely, the weather. So we just - we just worked flat out for - for those two days between, just getting everything out of here. And I spent a lot of time, like, cancelling bookings and - because there were just - we were booked out. We were booked out everywhere. So I spent a lot of time on the  
30 phone just sorting that out, getting refunds back to people and so forth. Yeah, we'd just - we knew it was coming.

MS DOVEY: Yes.

35 MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah.

MS DOVEY: In the period just before and after the fires, did you lose infrastructure, power, phones, road access?

40 MS JENNY ROBB: All of those. We lost power.

MS DOVEY: For how long .....

MS JENNY ROBB: We lost power. We lost phone. We had - well, the highway was  
45 closed from the - from about 10 Ks south of us to the south. So we had our son and daughter-in-law here with our grandchildren. So we sent them home early on the 31st because we knew the weather was going to change, and they took 10 hours to get to

Melbourne because they had to sort of crisscross all over the place as roads were closing and opening around them, which was terrifying for all of us. Yeah, I can't remember what the question was now, I'm sorry.

5 MS DOVEY: It was just about losing critical infrastructure from the area --

MS JENNY ROBB: Yes, so --

MS DOVEY: -- with road access, power, telephone and those sorts of things.

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MS JENNY ROBB: So we had no power for, I think, three weeks. In saying that, Essential Energy were excellent. Whenever we called, we could get somebody who was telling us roughly when we might get power. We had no mobile service for at least a week.

15

MR ARTHUR ROBB: Or longer.

MS JENNY ROBB: A bit longer actually and we had to - and we had no - because we had ADSL broadband, that whole line got cooked so we didn't have any - we didn't have any internet for a month. That was really challenging. When you're trying to communicate with people who've booked - we had bookings for the walking tours, the camp sites and the kayak tours. So I had a lot of phone calls and emails to make and refunds to do, which was very challenging when we didn't have any of those services, yeah.

25

MS DOVEY: Yes. So how did you manage that with the business when you didn't have any phone access at your property?

MS JENNY ROBB: All sorts of ways. I went and sat in cafés in town that - if they had internet. I'd sit in the main street because there's wi-fi in the main street of Eden. Frustrating though, because often what I needed to look for was on the computers back here or whatever. Yeah, it was - or I just drove up, if I drove up the road about -

35 MR ARTHUR ROBB: 5 Ks.

MS JENNY ROBB: -- 3 to 5 Ks, if I got on a hill, I could pick up mobile service. So I sometimes hotspotted off my phone because you didn't want to get dressed, you know, like, when you go to town - when you live out of town, you have to get dressed properly, you know. I - it was like all sorts of stuff going on in my head. I just wanted to get the work done but, yeah, it was challenging.

40

MS DOVEY: What was the state of your property? Like, it looks very green behind you at the moment but the fire came through, so it didn't look like that at the time?

45

MR ARTHUR ROBB: No.

MS JENNY ROBB: No, absolutely not. It was black everywhere.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: The only --

5 MS DOVEY: The house itself .....

MS JENNY ROBB: The house itself survived. It burnt all the way around the house to within a metre and cracked a window. But yeah, the house is made - well, it's corrugated iron for a reason.

10

MS DOVEY: So was that house specifically built for the environment?

MR ARTHUR ROBB: No.

15 MS DOVEY: For bushfires.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: Initially it was a shed and they had it lined inside and they had fibro on the outside but the fibro started to fall off. So I got Colorbond, I put it on the walls just to - a cheap easy way of keeping the house.

20

MS JENNY ROBB: But we also knew it was a good fire protection. Arthur was a concreter so we have a lovely concrete verandah all the way around the house and that also, I'm sure, helped. We moved all of the furniture off the - off the verandah. Everything was off the verandah. So there wasn't any - we knew - we knew, having  
25 been in the fire brigade, we knew about ember attack. We knew how easy it could be to start a fire. So everything was off the verandah. So there was nothing that was likely to be able to catch and ignite the house. So our preparation combined with good luck saved the house, yeah.

30 MS DOVEY: Very good. Other than that, the house was saved?

MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yeah.

MS DOVEY: Did you lose other structures on the property?

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MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yeah.

MS JENNY ROBB: Everything else: all of our sheds, the bridge to one of our camp sites and the whole garden, yep, and the garage.

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MS DOVEY: To those of us who live in cities, a shed might sound like it is not necessarily of significant value but I understand that if you're living in the country and if you're running a business off a country property - tell us about the value of the sheds?

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MR ARTHUR ROBB: Well, the shed is - was 7 metres deep and 100 metres long.

MS JENNY ROBB: Was.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: So it was a very large shed and we used to store the caravans in it for under cover storage. That's what it was built for.

5

MS JENNY ROBB: That was one part of the shed. The other part we concreted the floor and put roller doors in and that was where we stored our kayaks and all the gear for the kayak tours and the trailer for the walking tours. So, yeah, losing the sheds was probably pretty major for us.

10

MS DOVEY: Were you insured?

MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah, but the - when we - we had \$70,000 insurance on the big shed and when they assessed it, they said it was probably \$270,000 to replace it. So we haven't --

15

MS DOVEY: Did that come as a surprise?

MS JENNY ROBB: We haven't replaced a 100 metre shed.

20

MS DOVEY: Was that a surprise as to the actual cost of replacement?

MR ARTHUR ROBB: I thought it was a little bit high but yeah, I expected that we were definitely under.

25

MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: From what we insured for.

MS JENNY ROBB: It's hard to assess you know, and you sort of don't - when you're getting house insurance and you sort of don't even think about the fact that the whole lot could go. You think maybe, you know, something ignites in the shed and it burns down and it's just one shed. But it was all the sheds, and yeah. So we were underinsured. We were lucky that we had the insurance that we did have because that's enabled us to rebuild a smaller shed. But, yeah, we - yeah, we've still got a bit to go.

35

MS DOVEY: So where are you currently keeping the things that were previously in the shed?

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MS JENNY ROBB: In a container. So all the kayaks are shoved like tetris into a container at the moment, that we bought --

MS DOVEY: Like a shipping container?

45

MS JENNY ROBB: I beg your pardon?

MS DOVEY: Like a shipping container?

MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah.

5 MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yeah, a shipping container.

MS JENNY ROBB: We had - so we applied for a grant straightaway because we had  
- we had to get the kayaks out of the shed we had in town because it was being  
demolished. So we had to get them home but we had no security. So we - our son in  
10 Melbourne organised for a container to be brought up, yep. I can't even remember  
when that arrived, halfway through January, maybe.

MS DOVEY: So we've touched on this a bit already, but could you describe - could  
you just take us through the whole of how the fires have affected the businesses that  
15 you were running before they came through?

MS JENNY ROBB: Well, we can't have the caravan storage any more because we  
lost the big shed and all the fences. We - we've re-established a camp site but it's not  
where we want it to be because the bridge to the camp site burnt. We - we probably  
20 had maybe two tours between the fires and COVID, and then COVID hit. So - but  
we would have been getting some bookings by now, I think. And we can't run the  
Light to Light tour at all. Where we run it was on a specific walking track that has  
been completely obliterated.

25 MS DOVEY: The time of year that you've missed from summer through to now it's  
June, we're basically in winter, is that a busy time for your businesses?

MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yes.

30 MS JENNY ROBB: Our walking tours would have been ramping up now. We had  
bookings right through till October for those. We sometimes have kayak tours in  
June but it's mostly for internationals; June, July August tends to be internationals.  
So we had a busy long weekend because the three camp sites were booked out. So -  
yes, we've missed - we've missed pretty much the main part of the year with the  
35 kayak tours. We're normally busy up until now and then it slows down until about  
September, yeah.

MS DOVEY: Yes.

40 MS JENNY ROBB: So that's why we do the walking tours then.

MS DOVEY: And what was the effect of the fires on the rest of the community, the  
businesses that you said largely are connected with tourism?

45 MS JENNY ROBB: I can't even begin to think that - it's just huge. Absolutely huge.  
Not only the personal impact and the mental impact on everybody, because  
everybody knew someone who lost homes. But we lost - we lost all of our tourism

trade. So on the 1st of January - ironically, Arthur's birthday - there was a community meeting in town and basically that was where they said all the tourists have to go home. We had family in Bermagui and they described the panic and the chaos that went on there. But once they'd all gone, with the roads closed they  
5 couldn't come back. Even if - we had the empty eskies stay with us, all that stuff going on, they couldn't get here. So that was a massive impact and it's - it's - people are still reeling and I think a lot of business will close.

10 MS DOVEY: How long were the roads closed for, again?

MS JENNY ROBB: Oh, I think four to six weeks depending on which road. They were - they were all over the place, yeah. It was a long time.

15 MS DOVEY: And that's the school holiday period, isn't it?

MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah, and our major - we get 75 per cent of our domestic tourism from Melbourne. So that was the road that was closed. So from Bairnsdale pretty much north to the Victorian border, or further, that road was closed for weeks and weeks, yeah. And then school went back. So - well, it didn't - or it did. But, yeah,  
20 all of our holiday-makers couldn't get back.

MS DOVEY: .....

25 MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah. Massive impact.

MS DOVEY: So in that context, can you talk for a bit about the kinds of support that have been offered and made available, what the process has been for seeking and obtaining that support, and what about it has worked and what hasn't worked?

30 MS JENNY ROBB: I think we're lucky that the Bega Valley Shire had some experience with massive fires from the Tathra fires a couple of years ago, because they were very quick to establish a bushfire recovery centre in - in Bega. It was awkward that it was in Bega to start with. They set out some satellite ones later. It was pretty overwhelming but I - I don't blame anyone for that. It was just such an  
35 overwhelming event and so many people impacted, that it was confronting.

The first time I went there, there were people still bandaged, you know. So - and it was just traumatic repeating it over and over again to different agencies. I think it would have been, you know - in hindsight obviously it'd be great to have just one  
40 person hear your story instead of having to say it over and over again because it gets overwhelming. We were able - I mean, I'm pretty switched on with grants because I've done that in the past with my work. So the grant process wasn't that onerous if you were burnt. So we were - we had plenty of evidence, everything was burnt down.

45 So we had plenty of photos to show that that happened to us. I know of lots and lots of small businesses that were really traumatised by the whole process and not able to

get a cent until well into January and then it was like \$10,000 which really didn't have any impact on them. They were floored.

MS DOVEY: Were those businesses directly or indirectly affected?

5

MS JENNY ROBB: Indirectly. You know, an example, a little brewery up the road - I mean, we collaborate in tourism all the time. We work together all the time. And I talked to the friends of ours that run this business up the road and their first two weeks of January trade is normally 60 to 70 thousand dollars and they had \$6000. It was just - and then it was like "Oh well, you know, you weren't impacted because you weren't burnt." But people couldn't get here and that was why they were impacted as much, you know. Obviously, the first week after the fires everyone was just reeling and no one wanted to work anyway but once that was over, the initial - but, mind you, we had smoke for a month. So that didn't help. That didn't make it feel very comfortable here, yeah.

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MS DOVEY: Yes. Can you tell us what financial assistance you've been able to get for your businesses?

MS JENNY ROBB: We were lucky. We were able to - because we had a number of businesses running out of here and two ABNs we were able - both able to get the \$50,000 from the New South Wales Government. That was a huge, huge injection and helped us get our shed back up. Well, we've got one garage built now. We've got the shed slab down for the new - for the new shed and the shed kit arrived yesterday. So we're doling it out but - and although we were insured, we weren't insured to the extent that we probably should have been. So that's enabled us to rebuild a shed that's purpose-built and going to help us, you know, get back into business.

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MS DOVEY: Yes.

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MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah.

MS DOVEY: Yes. In terms of money from charities, have you had - have you personally had any interactions with charities?

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MS JENNY ROBB: Yes. We - in the first week when I first went up - everyone was - like, you spent virtually the first two weeks in tears. We got \$20,000 from Red Cross but that was - I had to really like almost beg for that mainly because our house didn't get burnt down. But we had no income at all and we were pretty worried about that. We - I mean, we had to send back \$18,000 in deposits on one business alone. So we were, like, watching our bank balance hit rock bottom and we just thought we're going to have to start dipping into our savings straightaway. So we applied for the Red Cross money. Got told no a couple of times, and then I went back to them and I said, "We have no income." So they ended up - they ended up folding, giving us \$20,000 back, yeah.

40

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MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yeah, we were virtually camping in the house. We had no power, no phone, no nothing. Luckily, we had a generator which we used for the walks. And so we used the generator here for when we had the kitchen, or then had to move the generator to get - pump water. And that's what we did for about three weeks. But, safety-wise, we had to be here.

MS DOVEY: You said that the process of applying for assistance actually hasn't been too difficult so long as you had direct damage.

10 MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah.

MS DOVEY: Which is great to hear.

15 MS JENNY ROBB: Yeah.

MS DOVEY: Do you think that would have been the same if the house had burnt with records and things like that? Do you think --

20 MS JENNY ROBB: Probably only because I'm reasonably savvy and I cloud-base a lot of my business documentation and my bookkeeping, it's in the cloud. So probably for me it probably wouldn't have been so bad but I would say a large majority of people aren't at that point. So, yeah, I really would feel for anybody who was a bit challenged about - like a lot of these businesses are small businesses and they don't have - you know, they don't have a cashbook, you know. They don't have proper records and they certainly probably don't have them stored offline - you know, online somewhere. So, yeah, that would have been horrendous. I don't know how you would do it, to be honest, yeah.

25 MS DOVEY: Can you talk a bit about other people's experience in the area? Have other people applied for loans, for support and been refused or are you getting the sense that people are getting the support that they need, other people around you?

30 MS JENNY ROBB: No, I'm not getting the sense that they're getting the support they need. Absolutely not. Most people that I talk to are still pretty traumatised by the whole event and the aftermath and the lack of understanding about that - that indirect impact. That - that's just really sent them reeling, nearly all of them, you know. And then insurance companies arguing that because they weren't burnt. They couldn't access, like the income - the loss of income and stuff like that. That was - that was - I believe from talking to others it has been really hard - really hard, even with really switched on businesses.

35 MS DOVEY: Yes. You've mentioned mental health a couple of times. Do you want to talk about that a little bit more specifically, about what that means for your community in the future?

40 MS JENNY ROBB: Well, Eden's been - Eden in particular has been through a whole bunch of terrible stuff over the last 25 years. So - it's interesting, what was really

obvious within a very short space of time was the community support within the community. A lot of people just came out of the woodwork and everybody seemed to get on. Everyone seemed to be really - and we only talked about this the other day - everyone was really quite calm because they knew everyone had been affected. I think there was a bit of - almost a feeling of camaraderie that we'd all survived this thing. But, yeah, I think there's going to be ongoing mental health issues. Even us, sometimes, we still crack up for no apparent reason, yeah.

10 MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yeah.

MS DOVEY: Is there mental health support in the community?

15 MS JENNY ROBB: I have not - I have not sought support. Probably yep, because we've been - I think it's still pretty raw. I know it's five months ago but it's still - because of what COVID - with COVID and everything, I think that it really just sort of was a double whammy. We haven't personally sought support but we've thought about it, yeah.

20 MS DOVEY: Do you know if it's available if you want it?

MS JENNY ROBB: I don't know what's available, no. In the past, regional areas have not had a great track record with getting any mental health help. I don't know that it'd be any different. And there's such a huge area in Australia was burnt, there's so many communities affected that I don't know whether there'd be enough mental health workers around, to be honest, to cover it all.

30 MS DOVEY: We've covered quite a lot of ground. Is there anything else that you'd like the Commissioners or the public generally to know about things that you think need to be done better that we haven't talked about already, in terms of either the period before the fires or during the fires or the support period afterwards? Is there anything else that you would like to --

35 MS JENNY ROBB: We need people to be moved back to regions and those - that will build resilience in small communities for the future. So I'm a tour operator. Eden relies on tourism but we also need other agencies and other businesses that prop up our economy so that when disasters like this happen there's still money in town. There's no money in our town now because of that. And those people have secure - they have secure jobs. They have a secure - when you work for the government you know that you're covered. You know, you know that you're not going to lose your job because there's a bushfire. But that's not happening down here. Those people have all been moved away. We need them back: all of them.

45 MS DOVEY: National Parks are a very large percentage of your local council area; is that right?

MS JENNY ROBB: Yes. Between National Parks and Forestry, they own 75 per cent of our shire and they don't pay rates. So we've got a little tiny 33,000 people

shire trying to manage some of the biggest areas of forest in Australia. It's nuts. It's really nuts. And then they're begging for money to try to support other businesses like tourism and other industries like that. It's wrong.

5 MS DOVEY: Yes.

MS JENNY ROBB: Yep.

10 MS DOVEY: Okay. Thank you. Arthur, did you have anything --

MR ARTHUR ROBB: No, I don't think so.

MS DOVEY: -- you wanted to add?

15 MR ARTHUR ROBB: She speaks too well, yeah.

MS DOVEY: She does speak well indeed.

20 MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yeah, that's right.

MS JENNY ROBB: You can .....

MS DOVEY: Okay. A final question --

25 MR ARTHUR ROBB: Yep.

MS DOVEY: -- your area, your community has been through a lot. First there's the fires and then COVID-19. Where do you see your local community going into the future?

30 MS JENNY ROBB: There's - this is the land of opportunity for tourism. We need support and we need infrastructure and we need funding to do that. And the Federal Government and the State Government, all of them, need to understand that regional communities need constant support otherwise we're all going to end up living in Sydney, and I tell you we're not going there. But we need to start thinking outside of metropolitan areas and start putting some of the decision-making back into the local areas and Eden - Eden's an amazing place and a beautiful place.

40 MS DOVEY: Thank you so much for speaking with us.

MR ARTHUR ROBB: Okay, thank you.

MS JENNY ROBB: Thank you.

45 <VIDEO END>

**<ADJOURNED 4:47 PM TO MONDAY, 13 JULY 2020 AT 1:30 PM>**