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Royal Commission into National  
Natural Disaster Arrangements  
Locked Bag 2000  
MANUKA ACT 2603

Dear Commissioners

### **RE: ACT GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO NATIONAL DISASTER ARRANGEMENTS**

I refer to your press release of 2 March 2020 seeking public submissions from interested parties to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (the Royal Commission). The ACT Government, like all governments, is currently focussed squarely on responding to another major public emergency in COVID-19 which has extended and compounded many of the economic and social issues created by the bushfires. Nonetheless, the following brief submission is provided to support the work of the Royal Commission. This is in addition to the information already provided to the Royal Commission by the ACT Emergency Services Agency and the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate.

I will also make this Submission available to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee who invited a written submission from the ACT Government for the Committee's inquiry into *'the lessons to be learned in relation to the preparation and planning for, response to and recovery efforts following the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season'*. I will also make this submission available to the ACT Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety's Review of ACT emergency services responses to the 2019-20 bushfire season.

The whole Australian community has been shocked and saddened by the scale and enormity of the destruction caused by the 2019-20 bushfires, which are unprecedented in Australian history. The ACT is proud to have contributed to the national response to the bushfire disaster both in firefighting and recovery. It is essential that governments, businesses, non-government organisations, volunteer groups and our broader communities continue to work together to help those impacted to recover from the wide and varied impacts.

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This recovery effort has been compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that all Australian jurisdictions are now in the midst of addressing, and that will be central to all decisions made by governments for many months to come.

The ACT Government is committed to implementing the National Bushfire Recovery Plan agreed to at the meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) on 13 March 2020, alongside all other Governments in Australia.

The ACT, like all jurisdictions, has had to move immediately from the 2019-20 bushfire disaster to responding to the COVID-19 public health emergency. As a result, we have chosen to provide a brief submission on key matters, and will continue to work with the Royal Commission to support its inquiries during these challenging times.

The ACT bushfire season ended on 31 March 2020 and the fires that impacted the ACT have now been put out. The ACT's operation as a strategic regional hub for aerial resources and response events has proven an effective model in the prevention and response to natural disasters in south east Australia and we will continue to provide assistance on a national scale wherever possible. The ACT's strategic location also puts us in a strong position to assist with the protection of critical national infrastructure such as Snowy 2.0.

Recovery is a key element of the ACT emergency management cycle and planning for and the commencement of recovery across the ACT began at the same time as the operational response to the fires. These processes encompassed the social, economic, natural and built environments.

The submission consists of two parts: the first part outlining the efforts of the ACT government to respond to the 2019-20 bushfire disaster to date, and the second part addressing the views of the ACT Government on matters of relevance to the scope of the Royal Commission.

### *Part 1 - The effort to date*

The ACT approach to the management of bushfire risk has significantly matured since the devastating 2003 Canberra bushfires. The multifaceted, comprehensive approach to managing bushfire risk and the ACT risk management approach encompasses well developed measures for prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

The ACT Government moved quickly to mitigate the risks associated with the impact of bushfire smoke on the Capital (commencing in December 2019), to respond to the threats to the region, and then to deliver a range of relief and recovery measures supporting those within the ACT and the surrounding region for which Canberra is the major regional hub.

While the number of businesses and private properties that had assets destroyed in the ACT as a result of the 2019-20 bushfires is small, the weeks of extreme bushfire smoke that blanketed Canberra and its surrounds, combined with restricted travel to and through the ACT as a result of fires in NSW, severely impacted business in the ACT. For many days, Australia's capital city ranked as the worst city in the world for air quality, forcing businesses in the hospitality and recreation sectors to cease or reduce trading during their peak season.

The ACT Government moved quickly and directly to assist the hospitality sector by announcing an immediate 50 per cent reduction in the cost of outdoor dining permits for existing permit holders and a waiver of all fees for the first 12 months for new permit holders. This supported businesses that suffered reduced trade as a result of the smoke that blanketed the ACT to continue offering outdoor dining experiences for the city's many tourists and residents. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has ultimately meant that many of these businesses had limited opportunity to trade after the bushfires were brought under control.

Beyond the assistance available to business under the various survival packages, the ACT Government is working closely with the tourism and hospitality sectors to ensure their viability as we enter the recovery phase with the prospect of ongoing restrictions limiting the ability of the sector to fully return to pre-COVID-19 and pre-bushfire levels of activity and visitation.

During this time we recognised the importance of consistency in delivering national recovery measures and sought to align and coordinate our efforts with the supports available under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DFRA) and those being offered in other jurisdictions.

This has included offering financial support, through the DRFA, to the many ACT volunteers who fought fires in the ACT, NSW and Queensland. We anticipate that around 200 volunteer firefighters from the ACT Rural Fire Service (ACTRFS) and the ACT State Emergency Service (ACTSES) may utilise this support, which offers payments of up to \$6,000. The Australian Government has agreed this support will also be available to ACT volunteers who fought fires interstate.

I am also pleased that as of 12 February 2020 we were able to confirm ACT small businesses would be able to access concessional loans through the DRFA, to support businesses that experienced a significant loss of revenue as a result of the natural disaster. We are still working with local businesses that may be able to access a concessional loan and will ensure loan agreements are offered and administered on terms consistent with other jurisdictions. At least one business has suffered asset damage as a direct result of the Orroral Valley fire and officials are working with that business to ascertain the extent of the damage and whether the business would meet the criteria to access the grants offered through the DRFA.

In relation to environment and recovery, the ACT Government established a rapid risk assessment team to assess damage and recovery needs across the environment estate. The team was multidisciplinary, tasked with carrying out fire impact assessment and identifying impacts and risks to threatened species' habitat, water quality and visitor infrastructure. A recovery team has been established that is now focused on reestablishment of the environment and infrastructure in consideration of a changing climate and conditions.

The Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve were impacted by fires in the ACT in early February 2020. Despite a number of successful conservation measures put in place to limit the loss of wildlife and sensitive sites in the park, the ecological damage and environmental impact has been extensive. Protecting the National Park including the Cotter River catchment, ACT's primary water supply, from further damage and supporting its recovery will be a significant and expensive task that will need to be undertaken jointly with the Australian Government.

It is important to recognise that our National Parks and reserves provide a range of facilities and services, including the provision of clean water, conservation of biodiversity, venues for recreation, wellness and nature-based tourism. The loss of and impacts on these services nationally due to the fires is significant and will have long term impacts on the economy, environment and communities.

In recognition of the priority that economic, social and environmental resilience and recovery from natural disasters now has in the ACT, I have enacted new Administrative Arrangements for the ACT Government. Responsibility for *Ecological recovery and resilience to bushfire affected areas* has been included in the Environment and Heritage portfolio, and *Bushfire and other natural disaster resilience and response* is now a specific matter of responsibility to the Police and Emergency Services portfolio.

The ACT Government has also commenced a review process of the Territory's preparedness for and response to bushfire threats, including land management such as hazard reduction measures and risk mitigation strategies, as well as cross border arrangements with NSW. The ACT looks forward to sharing the review outcomes with the Royal Commission in due course.

The ACT is a leader on climate change action. We have some of the most ambitious emission reduction targets in the world and are on track to be powered by 100% renewable electricity from 2020. The ACT Government's Climate Change Strategy 2019-2025 also identifies a range of actions associated with a sustainable, climate-wise built environment. This includes developing a climate-wise code and reflecting climate change projections and risk vulnerabilities in disaster and emergency prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, particularly for extreme heat, bushfire and flash flooding.

The ACT Government recognises the need for a shared and collective approach to achieving quality life outcomes for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and is encouraged by the commissions approach in this area. The ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement provides the framework for engaging and working with community, and among other things this has resulted in the establishment an Aboriginal Fire Management Zone in the ACT Strategic Bushfire Management Plan - 2019. The objective is to identify a landscape scale area in the ACT where the priority is to allow traditional burning practices to be undertaken by local Aboriginal groups.

## Part 2 – Moving forward

### *Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.*

The timeliness, complexity, scope and quantum of disaster recovery funding arrangements has been a concern to the ACT Government. The DRFA have at times proven difficult to initiate and implement in the context of a multi-jurisdiction disaster spanning several months. There may be an opportunity to improve the way these recovery arrangements can be initiated and utilised while a disaster may still be in progress.

ACT Government officials began liaising with the Australian Government in the first week of January 2020 to activate the DRFA in relation to the relief centre and supports being provided for people evacuating from the NSW South Coast.

The ACT was not itself in a state of emergency at this time and did not enter that state until the Orroral Valley fire burned through the Namadgi National Park. However, the ACT was actively supporting firefighting and evacuation efforts in the region from the early stages of the 2019-20 fires and the community was being impacted by severe bushfire smoke which covered the city for many weeks from December 2019 through January 2020.

On 12 February 2020 the ACT Government and Australian Government announced that the ACT's request for activation under the DRFA had been approved. While there were constructive efforts amongst all governments in the intervening period to develop and deliver consistent support across affected parts of the country, simpler recovery funding arrangements may have supported more timely support being delivered into the community when needed.

The 2019-20 bushfire disaster has highlighted that many government systems and structures that have served us well in the past may no longer be suitable for responding to the emergencies this country faces. For example, despite best intentions and efforts to move quickly in supporting recovery, the DRFA, which has been suitable after previous disasters, proved cumbersome and challenging to implement in these particular circumstances.

Reviewing and updating the DRFA to make it more practical and responsive during prolonged and changing disasters across multiple jurisdictions is one practical step governments can take to ensure we are better placed to respond to future disasters and support our communities in their time of need.

Improved consistency and clarity regarding the various funding mechanisms for disaster prevention, response and recovery will ensure governments can have appropriate investments recognised and are incentivised to invest in the critical areas of prevention and resilience.

#### *The role of the federal government in coordinating recovery arrangements*

The ACT Government acknowledges the need for the Royal Commission to examine national coordination of recovery arrangements for natural disasters, which is increasingly crucial in the process of rebuilding communities, increasing resilience and enabling ongoing preparedness for the natural disasters this country faces.

We encourage the Royal Commission to consider opportunities to increase the communication, coordination and interoperability between the Australian Government, and each state and territory's disaster management framework that are specific to the legal, social and environmental context of that jurisdiction.

The Royal Commission may wish to consider the circumstances and thresholds under which the states and territories can call on the Australian Government for support, the governance for such arrangements and opportunities to improve the availability of federal, state and territory resources and infrastructure in the instance of an emergency. This could include emergency alerts and warnings, resource sharing of operational response capability (including the Australian Defence Force), Public Safety Mobile Broadband, aerial firefighting appliances, strategic aviation support hubs and a common operating picture.

The ACT considers that the current mechanisms and criteria to request (and receive) national involvement in emergencies is somewhat unclear and should be reviewed, given that the frequency of future natural disasters on a national scale is likely to be higher.

#### *The role of climate change*

The ACT Strategic Bushfire Management Plan outlines the ACT Government's and community's preparation and response for bushfires, bushfire hazard assessment and risk analysis, bushfire prevention, and adaptive management to apply best practice bushfire management and prevention practices in a changing environment. This includes the increasing impacts of climate change.

The ACT Government considers that although not specifically instructed in its terms of reference, the Royal Commission should also consider broader mitigation strategies relating to climate change. As it currently stands, the terms of reference ignore the important role Australia must play in reducing global emissions to minimise the extent of climate change and its potential impacts on the Australian community.

Omitting climate change mitigation from the scope of the Royal Commission overlooks one of the key national drivers in determining the frequency and severity of future natural disasters.

Governments must maintain focus on the critical concurrent priorities of climate change (long term impact) and the development and implementation of mitigation strategies (short term impact).

#### *The role of the Australian Defence Force*

While states and territories have always worked together to manage emergencies, the unprecedented nature of these fires has forced governments, including the Australian Government, to go beyond the roles they have had in the past and respond collectively on a national scale.

The ACT Government considers the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) involvement in prevention and recovery efforts during this disaster to have been highly valuable. Integrating ADF support resources early into existing emergency management operational planning proved highly effective and valuable for the ACT's response to the 2019-20 bushfire operations.

The ACT Government strongly supports the Royal Commission examining the role and tasking of the ADF in order to clarify its future role in supporting jurisdictions during natural disasters and how the Australian Government would work with states and territories to deploy and coordinate these resources.

A more detailed strategy at a national level for the integration of ADF resources into all jurisdictions would be beneficial in aiding response and recovery operations nationally. To achieve this, it is critical that there exists (from a jurisdictional perspective) a reasonable level of understanding of the available military resources, their capabilities and limitations and, most importantly, how to access and integrate them in response and recovery operations. The Commission's consideration of the governance and prioritisation for deployment of the ADF may assist in bringing clarity and certainty to the arrangements.

#### *The role of national leadership in policy and research*

In 2014 The Forest Fire Management Group (FFMG) was asked by COAG to produce a National Bushfire Management Policy Statement for Australia. This was completed and signed by all state and territory Chief Ministers and Premiers as well as the Prime Minister. The policy is already in place and work could be done to re-focus national leadership and resourcing to achieving the 14 national goals.

There is a clear climate influenced trend toward longer bushfire seasons and associated increased ignition risk. Fires are lasting longer and fire behaviour is becoming increasingly complex. Land management and suppression agencies must continue investment in monitoring and managing fuel loads, fire risk and behaviour modelling and training of staff to deal with fire on the ground, whether through prescribed burning or direct fire suppression and back burning. It will not be possible for state and territory land management agencies to adapt to the climate influenced increase in fire risk without strong national leadership and investment in research, and a commitment to maintaining a national research capability currently in place through the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre.

### *Aerial Fire Fighting Capability*

The lengthening of the Northern Hemisphere summer has impacted the availability of aerial fire-fighting capability for Australia. The ACT acknowledges the Australian Government's co-ordination of additional aerial firefighting capacity in January 2020.

We strongly support the Royal Commission's examination of a longer-term plan for forecasting, resourcing, prioritisation, basing and coordination of a national aerial fire-fighting capability in light of increased and extended bushfire seasons globally. The ACT's role as a strategic hub for south east Australia means it is well suited as a base for domestic aerial firefighting capability.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make a submission, and we look forward to receiving recommendations that the Royal Commission brings down in your final report later this year. I acknowledge the need for expediency on these matters. However, I also acknowledge the complexity of responding to the COVID-19 public health emergency may make it challenging for governments to implement any recommendations of the Royal Commission before the start of the ACT's 2020-21 bushfire season.

The ACT Government will of course continue to assess the impact of the bushfires and recovery needs within the community and work closely with relevant governments and the Royal Commission to recover from these bushfires so we are able to respond effectively into the future.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Barr MLA  
Chief Minister  
29 April 2020