



Royal Commission
into National Natural
Disaster Arrangements

Submission Cover Sheet

This cover sheet has been prepared by the Commission's public contact team to accompany a submission.

Person completing cover sheet

1. **Staff member name** [REDACTED]
2. **Date completed** 21.05.2020
3. **This cover sheet has been completed based on:**
 - details contained in the submission
 - a phone call with the person making the submission
 - an email from the person making the submission
 - Other (provide details) -

Submission details

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7. **Preferred method of contact** either
8. **Is the submission based on:**
 - primarily based on their personal situation.
 - primarily based on their professional knowledge, qualifications or experience, or on behalf of a group or organisation
9. **If the person is making the submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation:**

If the submission based on personal experience:

10. **What was their personal situation in relation to the 2019-20 Bushfires? Choose all that apply.**
 - were not living in an area affected by bushfire
 - were in an area affected by bushfires but was not evacuated, and didn't suffer personal or financial loss
 - lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, but didn't suffer personal or financial loss
-

- lived in an area affected by bushfires and was evacuated, and I suffered personal or financial loss
- part of the emergency response as a fire fighter on the ground
- part of the emergency response as an aerial fire fighter
- part of the emergency response as health professional
- part of the emergency response as an Australian Defence Force member
- part of the emergency response as a Commonwealth or State government employee
- assisted the emergency response as a community support volunteer
- assisted the emergency recovery (i.e. after the fire event) as a community support volunteer
- Other

11. Where does the person live:

Local Government Area

Choose an item.

Town name

Post code

If the submission is based on professional experience

12. What is your area of expertise? Please choose all that apply.

- Emergency/disaster response and/or management
- Environment/land management
- Land use, planning, building standards
- Impacts of changes in climatic conditions
- Wildlife conservation
- Traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians
- Community welfare
- Other

All submissions

13. Does the person agree to their submission being published?

- Yes, agree to the submission being published in their name
 - Yes, agree to the submission being published anonymously
 - No, does not agree to the submission being published
-

Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disasters Arrangements

Robert Glasser¹

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on how Australia can strengthen arrangements to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters in the context of our rapidly changing climate.

In my previous role as the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction my task was to advocate globally for countries to strengthen their arrangements in these same areas consistent with the commitment countries have made in the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction*. I've had a chance to see these arrangements first-hand in many places (including in Australia), from national to local level, and to discuss with governments and other stakeholders the opportunities and constraints to further progress.

I'd like to begin by sharing some general observations about the circumstances that enable countries to strengthen their climate and disaster resilience and then present some specific and I hope practical recommendations concerning our national efforts to do so.

Achieving the resilience "Gold Standard"

The "gold standard" of success in strengthening resilience requires governments and stakeholders, including the private sector, to embed climate and disaster risk in core social and economic planning and investments at all levels, from national to local. Some countries have moved rapidly in this direction, most have not. In my experience, those that have are generally places that regularly experience extreme national-scale disasters, such as Bangladesh, the Philippines and Small Island Developing States. For these coun-

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tries, disasters exact an enormous cost annually and therefore mitigating disaster risk is a core economic and social priority.

For the vast majority of other countries, progress in strengthening resilience has been incremental, but not insignificant. Recent improvements in early warning, evacuation planning, land-use planning, construction codes, etc. have saved many lives and reduced the economic costs of disasters.

It's not surprising that the progress and investments in resilience have been incremental given the huge and urgent competing demands on governments for funding in other areas, the relatively low annual economic impact of disasters in these places, and the perception of many decision-makers that the risk of future national-scale disasters is quite low.

Climate change is rapidly altering this equation for many countries, including Australia. As we saw in the recent devastating bushfires, it is increasing the severity and scale of natural hazards. The science tells us that the pace of these changes is accelerating, so the likelihood of future national-scale crises is increasing and the need and political will for more fundamental investments in resilience will certainly grow as a result.

We are already seeing this change at a local level here in Australia. Over the past three years, more than half of Queensland's LGAs have experienced 3 or more major climate-related disasters that have required disaster "activations" (e.g. the need for disaster assistance from state and federal government). This is unprecedented and means these communities are in a constant (and unsustainable) state of recovering from disaster. For them, climate and disaster risk has clearly become core business.

We need to do what we can now, in the wake of the political momentum generated by the national bushfire disaster, to move us closer to the gold standard across all of Australia. Even small steps in this direction will save lives and significantly reduce economic costs.

Lack of a nationally coherent approach

The Government is already doing more to build Australia's climate resilience than it perhaps realises. That's because many of its initiatives are not branded as "climate change" and are buried in the bureaucratic silos of government departments that have other mandates.

Some examples of this include the \$5 billion Future Drought Fund, the \$4.5 billion Roads of Strategic Importance Initiative, the \$3.9 billion Emergency Response Fund, the \$1.5 billion National Water Infrastructure Development Fund, the \$130 million National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, and the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, each of which provides very significant funding for activities to strengthen resilience to floods, droughts and other hazards that climate change is amplifying.

However, there is a high risk that these large investments are not delivering their full potential. Without knowing the current level of investment in climate and disaster risk reduction and the areas of impact, it is impossible for government to evaluate the appropriateness of investments, identify gaps and allocate additional resources efficiently.

One problem is that these initiatives often approach climate and disaster risk differently, rely on different scientific and technical data concerning these risks, use different methodologies, and the risk reduction measures they call for tend to be add-ons, rather than consistent and coherent across commonwealth government.

Recommendation 1: Federal and states and territories governments should consider establishing climate and disaster risk labelling and budget lines in their public accounting systems.

Recommendation 2: A qualitative stocktake should be done of major climate and disaster risk investments across government, including sectoral investments buried in larger pro-

grammes, documenting the assumptions and methodologies underpinning them.

Recommendation 3: Drawing on the stocktake, international best practice and climate and disaster risk science, the federal government and states and territories governments should develop coherent and consistent methodologies and guidance for their jurisdictions and require that they be used consistently across government departments.

Bureaucratic silos can contribute to inefficiencies and undermine national coherence in building resilience. The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment coordinates the National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy, but the strategy is not integrated with the Department of Home Affairs' National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, even though over 90% of all disasters are from hazards, such as floods and droughts, that climate change is amplifying.

Drought—a slow on-set disaster hazard—is excluded from Australia's National Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction at least partly because EMA's bureaucratic mandate is associated with sudden-onset disaster response, whereas comprehensive risk reduction planning would incorporate both sudden-onset and slow-onset hazards and the interactions between the two (e.g. drought can erode a community's resilience to other hazards, such as bushfires and floods).

Recommendation 4: The government should develop one coherent multi-hazard framework to build “Resilient Australia” that integrates climate risk with disaster risk and includes both sudden on-set disasters and slow-onset disasters, such as drought. The states and territories should do the same across their jurisdictions and their work should be key inputs to the national framework.

Moving from incremental to fundamental investments in resilience

Many more investments made across Government are not currently, but could be, leveraged to strengthen Australia's resilience. An example is the \$100 billion National Infrastructure Investment Programme. This is in spite of the fact that evidence suggests that the objectives of these programs could be achieved at *lower cost* if they were embedded within a resilience framework (e.g. infrastructure that is less expensive overall because it doesn't need to be repaired or rebuilt after a disaster).

Many other countries are moving in this direction. For example, reducing the risk of disasters is the second of the four goals in the Japanese Government's Priority Plan for Infrastructure Development.

The same opportunity exists to expand resilience impact at the level of most states and territories, each of which provides relatively small amounts of dedicated funding to support local government efforts to reduce disaster risk or to adapt to climate change, but is missing opportunities to leverage climate and disaster risk reduction (and save money) within the far larger amount of funding each provides to support local governments in areas such as transport, education, manufacturing, energy and water supply, health, tourism, agriculture and fisheries.

Recommendation 5: The federal and states and territories governments, drawing upon the methodologies indicated in Recommendation 3, should mandate that sectoral departments apply the methodologies in the design and screening of major investments and programmes. This would include incorporating "resilience" in RFPs and tenders and encouraging local governments to identify uses for sectoral funding that simultaneously strengthen resilience.

Recommendation 6: It may be administratively easier to implement Recommendation 5 by incorporating climate and disaster resilience within existing project and programme scree-

ning frameworks, such as environmental impact statements. This should be explored further.

Establishing a governance structure for *Resilient Australia*

Australia lacks an effective governance structure to build *Resilient Australia*. The structure should fundamentally allow the needs and requirements of local communities to flow from the bottom up, with the funding, facilitation and technical support and guidance from state and federal agencies flowing top-down. The accountability in the system would emerge from the transparency and coherence of the planning, in which jurisdictions sign-up to deliver specific outputs that collectively achieve national strategic outcomes. Additional accountability would be linked, as it is currently, to the terms and conditions of the funding provided.

Recommendation 7: The governance structure for *Resilient Australia* should fundamentally allow the needs and requirements to flow bottom-up from local communities, with the funding, facilitation and technical support and guidance flowing top-down from state and federal agencies

Parts of this governance model already exist. In Queensland, for example, experience has shown that regional organisations of councils (ROCs) have been an effective mechanism for resilience and mitigation planning and investment and an effective conduit for developing regionally-coordinated responses to regional problems. Implementation of Recommendation 5 would mean that the ROCs resilience work would shift from developing plans and funding requests narrowly linked to dedicated state and federal disaster risk management funds to recommending investments that build resilience across all-sectors within the ROC and their local council members' economic investment planning.

The local council and ROC resilience investments would be incorporated within the district investment plan and the district investment plans would form part of the states and territories resilience

planning, with the state and territories plans informing part of the national resilience planning.

Recommendation 8: Building on existing structures to establish the governance framework should be considered, although changes in the structures may result from the wider mandate associated with building *Resilient Australia*.

Although the emergency management communities at federal and states and territories level are powerful and passionate advocates for mitigating climate and disaster risk (they see the consequences of our failure to do so on a daily basis!), they are not in a strong position to coordinate the development and implementation of the national framework for *Resilient Australia*. If building *Resilient Australia* is going to be a national priority (and not pigeon-holed as a disaster management issue or a climate adaptation issue) then it should (at least initially) be coordinated out of PM&C and by the equivalent at state and territories levels.

Recommendation 9: At least initially, coordination of the governance framework should be at the highest levels of government, to overcome the bureaucratic silos that risk pigeon-holing the initiative, which may include aligning resilience and recovery agencies, where they exist, with central agencies.

A truly coherent national framework should include at least some representation from the private sector and civil society at both national and states and territories levels. It should also include both defence and foreign affairs at national level. As we are [already seeing](#), our military will increasingly need to be called upon to support disaster response within Australia and [to respond](#) to regional disasters, territorial disputes, and people movements driven by food instability and other climate-related disruptions. Careful targeting of the aid program's [\\$665 million](#) of development assistance for resilience-building can support both our humanitarian and national security objectives, decreasing the need for ADF responses to some of these emerging challenges.

Recommendation 10: The private sector and civil society organisations should be represented in resilience governance structures at federal and states and territories levels.

Recommendation 11: Consider incorporating this broader formulation of a role for defence and Australian aid in a coherent national framework and response.

Engaging the public

Experience internationally suggests that it is useful in building public and political support for, and awareness of, initiatives to strengthen resilience, if the initiatives are accompanied by a public information campaign. This should include a programme to select national *Resilient Australia* “Champions” from all walks of society: local governments, aboriginal leaders, the private sector, etc. Australia has such a programme currently, but its profile should be strengthened and its impact greatly amplified as part of the broader efforts described above.

Recommendation 12: Roll-out a strengthened *Resilient Australia* Champions programme to accompany and support implementation of the other initiatives described above.

I would be very pleased to elaborate on any of the above points, should the Commissioners feel it would be useful.

Robert Glasser

20 May 2020

Canberra