



Submission to the Senate Inquiry: Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20

22 May 2020

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

Introduction

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

The recent 2019-20 summer of bushfires focused the attention of the nation on the critical roles that volunteers play during emergencies and the significant volunteer workforce that is at the forefront of the response to such a national crisis.

On 5 February 2020, the Senate initiated an inquiry into lessons to be learned in relation to the preparation and planning for, response to and recovery efforts following the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season.

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry and to contribute evidence on the role of volunteers in the emergency response. A series of guiding principles and recommendations have been suggested which would strengthen the emergency volunteer workforce and the enabling volunteering infrastructure.

Our submission relates to the following Terms of Reference (TOR) of the inquiry¹:

- the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery – TOR (b)
- the adequacy of the Federal Government's existing measures and policies to reduce future bushfire risk, including in relation to assessing, mitigating and adapting to expected climate change impacts, land use planning and management, hazard reduction, Indigenous fire practices, support for firefighters and other disaster mitigation measures – TOR (d)
- best practice funding models and policy measures to reduce future bushfire risk, both within Australia and internationally – TOR (e)
- existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency – TOR (f)

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory peak volunteering bodies. Our submission draws on two recent pieces of consultation, research and policy development:

- A position paper in response to the Australian Government's volunteer emergency service compensation scheme, which involved targeted consultation with emergency service volunteer organisations.

¹ The full Terms of Reference are at the end of this document.

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

- Our Pre-Budget submission, which was the result of consultation with volunteers, managers of volunteers, Volunteer Involving Organisations, Volunteering Support Services, and others in civil society.

We have grouped our response under the following headings:

- The role of volunteers during the bushfire response
- The Australian Government's Emergency Service Compensation Scheme
- Investing in the volunteer workforce and the enabling infrastructure

The role of volunteers during the bushfire response

A wide range of volunteers and Volunteer Involving Organisations played a significant and effective role in the bushfire emergency response. This included the first responders (volunteer fire and ambulance workers and state emergency service volunteers) and the many volunteers in community service organisations who, for example, ran evacuation centres, secured food and water for those in need and helped people apply for emergency relief. However, as we discuss below, these organisations need to be better resourced to undertake these roles in future emergencies.

Volunteers are critical to Australia's emergency management systems and comprise a considerable proportion of the emergency management workforce.

A broad definition of "emergency volunteering" includes "any and all volunteering that supports communities before, during and after a disaster or emergency, regardless of its duration or its particular organisational affiliation, or lack thereof".²

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2014 General Social Survey estimated that 217,100 people (or 3.8% of volunteers in Australia) had volunteered for emergency services in the previous 12 months, with each emergency service volunteer contributing an average of 42.5 hours per year.³

In another estimate, over 2014-15, there were 256,655 fire, ambulance and emergency service volunteers (and another 1,122 community first response ambulance volunteers) registered by emergency service organisations across Australia.⁴

"This figure swells into the vicinity of 500,000 with the addition of volunteers with non-government community service organisations that provide vital support to communities when an emergency event occurs. This formal volunteer capacity sits

² McLennan, B, Kruger, T (2019) Emergency volunteering 2030: Views from managers in volunteerism. RMIT University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC. Melbourne, Australia.

³ Estimates of volunteer numbers (sometimes referred to as "members") have been highly variable. See Bill Calcutt (2019) Valuing Volunteers: Better understanding the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services, p33.

⁴Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, Report on Government Services 2016, pD9.

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

alongside a significant, but far less visible, capacity to help people before, during and after disasters in wider Australian society through informal, emergent, and 'unaffiliated' (with [Emergency Management Organisations]) volunteering.”⁵

Much of the attention of the public debate during the summer focused on firefighters and SES volunteers. However, governments should remain aware that responses to emergencies such as bushfires involve volunteers from many other agencies and not-for-profit organisations beyond rural fire agencies and State Emergency Service organisations. Furthermore, the need for long shifts over prolonged periods in disaster response by volunteers is just one of many factors impacting the emergency volunteer workforce.

“Given Australia’s geographic size, low population density and natural hazard risk profile; it is not feasible to provide adequate emergency preparedness, response, relief and recovery services to communities across the country without volunteers”.⁶

Special consideration needs to be given to the rural context in which much of the Australian emergency service volunteering takes place. Volunteers in rural areas of Australia are most often on the frontlines of fire emergencies.

“In rural communities... across Australia, volunteers are the only source of many essential services. Quite simply, without volunteers, there would be no ambulance service, fire service or other critical emergency and support.”⁷

Emergency volunteerism has benefits beyond putting out fires and protecting lives and property. In addition to the contribution that volunteers provide in time and labour, there are “significant psychosocial benefits of emergency volunteering for volunteers and for communities affected by emergency events.”⁸

⁵ McLennan, B and Kruger, T 2019, Emergency volunteering 2030: Views from managers in volunteerism (Environmental Scan Report No. 1), RMIT University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC (Cooperative Research Centre), Melbourne, Australia. p10.

⁶ Tarn Kruger and Blythe McLennan (2018) - Emergency volunteering 2030: views from local government managers Environmental Scan Report No. 2, p9.

⁷ The Conversation (2018) Why Rural Australia is Facing a Volunteer Crisis, <https://theconversation.com/why-rural-australia-is-facing-a-volunteer-crisis-95937>

⁸ Tarn Kruger and Blythe McLennan (2018) Emergency Volunteering 2030: Views From Local Government Managers Environmental Scan Report No. 2, p.11.

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

The Australian Government's Emergency Service Compensation Scheme

Whilst we welcome initiatives to ensure volunteers are not out of pocket for their contribution, the compensation scheme was introduced with no consultation and therefore did not draw on the perspectives and expertise of emergency service volunteers.

[Australian Government's Emergency Service Compensation Scheme.](#)

Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced compensation payments for New South Wales volunteer firefighters on 29 December 2019. The scheme was then expanded to include other emergency responses that involved volunteers from other States and Territories.

"The early and prolonged nature of this fire season has made a call beyond what is typically made on our volunteer firefighters," [Prime Minister] Morrison said.
"While I know RFS volunteers don't seek payment for their service, I don't want to see volunteers or their families unable to pay bills, or struggle financially as a result of the selfless contribution they are making."⁹

The Australian Government provided eligible volunteers with up to \$300 a day capped at a total of \$6000 as compensation for time off work to respond to the bushfires. Only volunteers who responded to the bushfires for over 10 days were eligible. The scheme only applied to employees from small-medium sized businesses and those that were self-employed. Compensation is for lost wages and income. This means people who volunteer on their days off did not receive any compensation as they had not lost wages and income. The payments were tax-free and not means tested.

Volunteer firefighters and emergency service volunteers employed by large business were not eligible. "We expect larger companies to provide their employees with 20 days of emergency services leave," Prime Minister, Scott Morrison.¹⁰

In December 2019, the Australian Government implemented "contingency arrangements" until 19 January 2020 for emergency volunteers on welfare supports. These arrangements included the suspension of mutual obligation requirements for those volunteering as part of the emergency response.¹¹ The Australian Government originally estimated that the cost of the scheme, which is

⁹ Liberal Party of Australia (2019) New Payments to Support NSW Volunteer Firefighters, <https://www.liberal.org.au/latest-news/2019/12/29/new-payments-support-nsw-volunteer-firefighters>

¹⁰ ABC (2019) Scott Morrison Announces Volunteer Firefighter Compensation, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

¹¹ Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business (2019), Exemptions for Volunteer Firies, <https://www.employment.gov.au/newsroom/exemptions-volunteer-firies>

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

uncapped, could reach \$50 million.¹² The scheme was administered by State and Territory governments which made agreements with the Australian Government to opt into the scheme.

Previous Volunteer Compensation Schemes

The current 2019-20 volunteer compensation scheme had prior precedent in Australia, but at a smaller scale.

Previous Prime Ministers, Paul Keating and John Howard, offered one-off payment schemes for volunteers, which were distributed by the Federal Government.¹³

- 1994 Sydney bushfires, with more than 200 homes lost and four people killed: Paul Keating made disaster relief payment under the social security system (of up to \$2000 for a family and \$1000 for a single person), to compensate for property damage and loss of income, to also be available to volunteer firefighters.¹⁴
- 2001 Black Christmas Fires, with more than 100 homes burnt: John Howard used the Social Security Act law to pay firefighters up to \$160 a day.¹⁵

Recent trends in the volunteer emergency management workforce

The broad trends of volunteering show a concerning decline of the volunteer emergency management workforce.¹⁶ This is still the case even if some areas of Australia and individual emergency workforces (such as firefighters or ambulances) have a healthy and sustainable volunteering workforce.¹⁷

Delivery of emergency management services typically requires an ongoing, formal and professionalised volunteer workforce. Due to the unpredictable nature of natural disasters, organisations require large numbers of registered and trained volunteers, even if emergencies do not

¹² ABC (2019) Scott Morrison Announces Volunteer Firefighter Compensation, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

¹³ Canberra Times (2019) ACT government to seek advice on RFS compensation scheme, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6559728/act-government-to-seek-advice-on-rfs-compensation-scheme/>

¹⁴ Keating, Paul (1994) Interview with the Prime Minister, The Hon. P.J. Keating M.P. Kirribilli House Sydney, Monday 10th January 1994, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-9097>

¹⁵ Daily Mail (2019) The legal loophole that could allow Scott Morrison to pay volunteer firefighters without changing the law – as the PM works on plan to compensate hard-up heroes, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7830307/Scott-Morrison-pay-volunteer-firefighters-government-law.html>

¹⁶ The Guardian (2020) Australia's volunteer firefighting force declined 10% in past decade, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/29/australias-volunteer-firefighting-force-declined-10-in-past-decade>

¹⁷ Perth Now (2019) St John Ambulance bucks trend on declining volunteers, <https://www.perthnow.com.au/news/health/st-john-ambulance-bucks-trend-on-declining-volunteers-ng-b881148433z>

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

eventuate over one particular season. Importantly, volunteers must be resourced and trained well in advance of an actual emergency.

The ABS estimates a decline of the percentage of the total 18+ population volunteering for emergency services from 2.45% in 2010 to 1.23% in 2014 (2015).¹⁸ The decline is both of the number of people engaged in long-term, formal volunteering, and also a decline in the average number of hours that people dedicate to this type of volunteering.^{19,20}

“Over the last decade a series of official reports have acknowledged the growing pressures on, and a general decline in, formal emergency service volunteering (as reflected in the ABS data). The 2011 National Volunteering Strategy observed that “the rate of natural disasters in Australia is predicted to increase in coming decades, and emergency management volunteering is facing a range of challenges. Declining numbers of emergency management volunteers is an issue for many Australian communities. The commitment required of volunteers in time, training, periods away during emergencies and associated costs is great.”²¹

There are several factors contributing to the decline of formal volunteering and challenges that require adaptation by volunteering communities. Some of the major drivers and challenges to overcome and adapt to include: “structural economic change that has increased competition between paid and voluntary work time; and demographic change, particularly an ageing population, greater participation of women in the workforce, urbanisation, and declining populations in some rural areas.”²²

It should be noted that there are often surges in expressions of interest and recruitment of volunteers following natural disasters. This is the case for the current 2019-20 bushfire season.²³ The focus should

¹⁸ Bill Calcutt (2019) Valuing Volunteers: Better understanding the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services, p33.

¹⁹ McLennan, B and Kruger, T 2019, Emergency volunteering 2030: Views from managers in volunteerism (Environmental Scan Report No. 1), RMIT University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC (Cooperative Research Centre), Melbourne, Australia. P11.

²⁰ The Guardian (2020) Australia's volunteer firefighting force declined 10% in past decade, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/29/australias-volunteer-firefighting-force-declined-10-in-past-decade>

²¹ Estimates of volunteer numbers (sometimes referred to as “members”) have been highly variable. See Bill Calcutt (2019) Valuing Volunteers: Better understanding the primary motives for volunteering in Australian emergency services, p33.

²² McLennan, B and Kruger, T 2019, Emergency volunteering 2030: Views from managers in volunteerism (Environmental Scan Report No. 1), RMIT University & Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC (Cooperative Research Centre), Melbourne, Australia, p11.

²³ The Age (2019) 'Bullying culture' blamed as volunteer firefighter numbers drop across Australia, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/bullying-culture-blamed-as-volunteer-firefighter-numbers-drop-across-australia-20191229-p53nfo.html>

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

be however, on the underlying medium-term trends, rather than volunteer rates from year to year, because of the need to have a prepared and sustainable workforce.

There are more factors which differ between regions and sectors which further complicate our understanding and ability to plan for our national emergency volunteer workforce. Some of the considerations that were reported in our consultation on the compensation scheme include:

- Improved management and scheduling techniques which might be a reason for lower rates of formal, registered emergency volunteers in some jurisdictions and sectors, rather than a declining workforce.
- Some volunteers are registered with organisations as a gesture of notional support and may not be available to respond to emergencies. These volunteers would inflate volunteering rates but not add functionality to the workforce.

The Compensation Scheme Effects on Emergency Volunteerism

The fact that some volunteer associations, volunteers and the public felt that compensation was necessary during the 2019-20 bushfire season points to some serious and fundamental structural workforce issues and environmental challenges that need to be addressed.

While the final quantum of compensation is still unknown, the early assumption by the Australian Government was that the total will approximate \$50 million.²⁴ It is also not known exactly what effects the volunteer compensation scheme will have into the future.

The assumption is that large companies, with greater capacity to provide employee leave than small-medium-sized businesses, will provide appropriate leave to their employees. The Australian Government “expect[s] larger companies to provide their employees with 20 days of emergency services leave”. It is unknown how large business have responded and how commonplace emergency volunteering leave practices are. There is no mechanism of monitoring or enforcing such an aspiration.

Investing in the volunteer workforce

The 2019-20 bushfire crisis has demonstrated the critical role of volunteers in emergency response and recovery. In preparation for future disasters, we must ensure that Volunteer Involving Organisations are resourced to recruit, train, manage and lead volunteers during an emergency. Volunteering is time given freely. However, ensuring that volunteers can contribute safely and effectively requires significant investment. Furthermore, the enabling infrastructure of volunteering is in urgent need of modernisation. In particular, investment is needed in digital platforms for

²⁴ ABC (2019) Scott Morrison announces compensation payments for New South Wales volunteer firefighters, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

volunteer recruitment and matching that would enable a more responsive and coordinated approach.

The emergency volunteering sector, encompassing half a million volunteers, and the broader volunteering sector beyond that, which spans multiple jurisdictions and has long planning time horizons, is diverse and complex. The following principles are intended to help guide decision-makers to navigate future challenges for emergency service volunteerism.

Guiding Principle 1: Maintain a clear conceptual understanding of volunteering as “time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.”

We must ensure that national volunteer policy responses do not undermine the culture and the ethos of volunteering by introducing financial considerations that could be considered a wage or salary. The Australian Government and State and Territory Governments should continue to communicate and emphasise that the volunteer compensation scheme, announced during the 2019-20 bushfire emergency, was developed in extraordinary circumstances. The intention was not to begin to “pay” volunteers but to compensate those adversely affected by prolonged volunteering and it is not the intention to continue the compensation into future disaster periods.

Guiding Principle 2: Reimburse and cover out of pocket expenses of volunteers

Emergency service organisations should have the resources available (for training, equipment, clothing and so on), and the ability to manage the volunteer workforce, so that no volunteer requires financial compensation, beyond ordinary out-of-pocket expenses. Volunteer Involving Organisations should commit to the goal of “zero cost volunteering”.²⁵

Guiding Principle 3: Protect the health and safety of volunteers

Excessively long shifts and prolonged periods of emergency response volunteering should be minimised, to the extent that is possible in the often extreme realities of emergency contexts. Best-practice volunteer management practices and the latest technologies should be made available to support the volunteer workforce. Consideration should be made to support volunteers and their families with the heavy toll on mental health that emergency responses can take (including serious clinical issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).²⁶

Guiding Principle 4: Recognise the contribution of volunteers

²⁵ Judy Esmond, (2016) Report on The Attraction, Support and Retention of Emergency Management Volunteers 2016, p.7.

²⁶ ABC News Australia (2019) Emergency workers 'too busy' to flag traumatic events and missing out on peer support, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-19/emergency-workers-mental-health-concerns/11425626>

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

Volunteers have many different non-financial motivations for contributing their time. Volunteer recognition comprises one of the eight *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement*²⁷. For organisations to meet the National Standards they must demonstrate, “volunteer contribution, value and impact is understood, appreciated and acknowledged.”

Initiatives such as awarding emergency service volunteers with the National Emergency Medal are welcome and encouraged.²⁸ Recognition of volunteering contributions should be ongoing (such as observing National Volunteer Week and other national and international days of recognition) even when volunteers are not required to respond to emergencies. This reflects the fact that emergency volunteers give so much of their time before responding to fires, for preparation, training and so on.

Guiding Principle 5: Consult widely with the experts, including volunteers

We need to be cognisant of varying contexts of volunteerism in different organisations and States and Territories, which have primary responsibility for responding to emergencies. Each jurisdiction has its own emergency management arrangements, levels of resourcing and natural environmental challenges, including fires, flooding and cyclones.

The experts in these regards are the volunteer rural firefighter, volunteer SES and other relevant volunteer organisations that specialise in recruiting, training, resourcing and mobilising emergency service volunteers, all in high-risk environments.

There needs to be more collective deliberation on volunteer compensation policies and how to sustain an emergency volunteer workforce. Consultation should be wide, given that all jurisdictions will be affected directly or indirectly.

Consultation should also be undertaken prior to public announcements, with organisations given the appropriate time to coordinate internally and to communicate policies (such as a volunteer compensation schemes) to their workforce and the public.

Volunteers have valid insights to contribute to the development of future policies and strategies. In line with the *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement*, volunteers should be provided with opportunities to give their feedback on decision-making that impacts them, their families and the community. Volunteers have a right to have their voices heard, based on their lived experience, and should be incorporated as a group into future government consultations.

²⁷ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/national-standards-and-supporting-material/#/>

²⁸ Sydney Morning Herald (2020) Emergency Medal to Recognise Bushfire 'Service and Sacrifice', <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/emergency-medal-to-recognise-bushfire-service-and-sacrifice-20200126-p53use.html>

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

Recommendations for change

Recommendation 1: Clarify the Australian Government's volunteer compensation position for future emergencies

Volunteering Australia recommends that the Australian Government continues to communicate that the current compensation scheme is not an ongoing policy, once the 2019-20 bushfire season is over. This is necessary to ensure a clear blueprint for the future which will provide Volunteer Involving Organisations and the sector with more certainty and the ability to better plan for and support their workforce. This in turn will support the most efficient use of limited funds and resources.

If the key purpose of a compensation policy is to reduce financial barriers for volunteers and minimise the impact of prolonged volunteering on their families, then the duration of the eligibility requirements should be revisited. Many individuals and organisations have questioned how and why eligibility limit was determined to be 10 days before compensation becomes available.

Recommendation 2: Develop an emergency management workforce strategy

The current volunteering model is not likely to be sustainable if Australia continues to experience emergencies on the scale seen on the East Coast in 2019-20. Given the medium-long term trends and challenges of sustaining an emergency volunteer workforce, the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs should lead the development of an emergency management workforce strategy, which includes particular consideration of volunteers. The strategy should consider the role of the Australian Government and how it can best support and complement the State and Territory governments to maintain a thriving workforce of volunteers. For an example, see the *Emergency Management Victoria Sector Workforce Strategy*.²⁹

Workforce planning should consider the challenges of delivering emergency services in rural communities that are experiencing depopulation or ageing populations. Future workforce strategies will also need to account for business employee volunteering leave practices and volunteering leave provisions for public servants.

Recommendation 3: Lead a recruitment drive for emergency volunteers

To support the promotion of emergency volunteering and to increase volunteering rates, a video campaign could be developed which showcases the work that emergency volunteers perform, outlines the benefits of volunteering and encourages people to sign up before a disaster strikes.

²⁹ Emergency Management Victoria (2019) Emergency Management Sector Workforce Strategy, <https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/about-us/current-projects/emergency-management-sector-workforce-strategy>

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

For examples of these kinds of campaigns see the emergency volunteer “Join, Learn, Be Ready”³⁰ campaign in Tasmania; the “Get Behind the Front Line” campaign in Western Australia³¹ and also the Defence Jobs Australia³² national Defence recruitment video campaign.

Volunteering Australia and the seven volunteering peak bodies could play a supporting role, with the Australian Government, in developing these videos with emergency volunteering organisations.

Recruitment drives should cover the diversity of volunteering roles available in emergency services, including numerous roles that also provide behind the scenes support during emergency response, relief and recovery.

Recommendation 4: Ensure there are comprehensive mental health support services for emergency volunteers

Due to the damaging psychological toll that emergency services can take, volunteers in every Australian jurisdiction should have access to comprehensive mental health supports. The Australian Government should work with all States and Territories to ensure that there is widespread service provision for volunteers, particularly those who were involved in the 2019-20 bushfires.

Recommendation 5: Invest in the enabling infrastructure of the volunteering sector

There are various elements of supporting infrastructure that facilitate a thriving, efficient and safe volunteering sector, including online tools, inter-organisational networks, Volunteering Support Services and so on.

Volunteering Australia has made proposals to broadly and holistically strengthen the volunteering sector in the recent *Volunteering Australia 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission*.³³ Where emergency service volunteering organisations and emergency volunteers could benefit from investments for the volunteering sector in general, the government should explore funding Volunteering Australia’s proposals.

Some means of supporting volunteering through the broader volunteering infrastructure include investments in:

³⁰ Tasmanian Government (2020) Join, Learn, Be Ready: Become an Emergency Volunteer, <http://www.emergencyvolunteers.tas.gov.au/>

³¹ Mirage News (2019) ‘Get Behind Frontline’ to help our emergency services, <https://www.miragenews.com/get-behind-frontline-to-help-our-emergency-services/>

³² Australian Defence Force Recruiting YouTube Channel (2020) Defence Jobs Australia, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChjK_qDUvhJEgt1S0NGO2w

³³ Volunteering Australia (2019) Volunteering Australia 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission, <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/download/85/submissions-2019/17186/december-2019-2020-21-pre-budget-submission.pdf>

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

- GoVolunteer and other online recruitment platforms which enable Volunteer Involving Organisations and volunteers to connect and undertake formal volunteering opportunities. As the sector evolves and grows, maintenance and enhancements are required to ensure functionality is up to date with user expectations and user needs. These platforms support emergency volunteering and the volunteering sector as a whole.
- Digital apps and software that help recruit and manage volunteer workforces. Like other online platforms, investments in the best technology have flow on benefits for Volunteer Involving Organisations that involve volunteers in emergencies

Administrative processes can create barriers for volunteers and increase workloads for managers of volunteers. The nature of the recent crisis resulted in many volunteer responders moving between jurisdictions under different regulatory regimes. While administration and regulations are in place for the protection of the whole community (for example through police checks and working with children checks), any ways of streamlining or supporting Volunteer Involving Organisations to reduce red tape would be beneficial, particularly to facilitate people volunteering interstate.

Recommendation 6: Actively promote emergency volunteerism and corporate social responsibility (volunteering leave policies) to the private sector

Volunteers come from all sectors, including the public sector and the not-for-profit sector. Various businesses have played an important role in supporting communities through the bushfires. However, there are no mechanisms or legal supports for workers to be granted volunteering leave. In some areas, employers will grant paid leave for their employees to volunteer as part of longstanding norms and business practices, based on the understanding of their workers' need to respond to emergencies. But this is not the case in every workplace. A widespread business culture of allowing leave for emergency volunteerism should be encouraged and enabled.

Action should be taken by the Australian and State and Territory governments and their representatives to promote more consistent and widespread leave practices to employers. Such a soft approach would help to entrench norms of providing volunteering leave, particularly in times of emergencies, that would help reduce barriers to volunteers.

Consistent messaging could be supported by the development of best practice guides by departments and government agencies (including the Fair Work Commission).

Recommendation 7: Develop and communicate a policy on Commonwealth welfare support compliance obligations for volunteers during disasters

To better activate and support the emergency volunteer workforce, policies should be developed relating to mutual obligation requirements and other compliance matters for volunteers during emergencies. Greater planning and coordination well in advance of emergencies will likely reduce administrative barriers for volunteers and reduce financial hardship on volunteers and their families.

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

Conclusion

We have welcomed the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry and to contribute evidence on the critical role of volunteers. Overall, stronger mechanisms are needed to coordinate the volunteer response across jurisdictions. Volunteer Involving Organisations played a vital role during the 2019-20 bushfire emergency, but they need to be better resourced if they are to play this role effectively in future disasters.

The guiding principles and recommendations that have been suggested would strengthen the emergency volunteer workforce and the enabling volunteering infrastructure.

It was encouraging that the role of volunteers was acknowledged by governments during the bushfires. However, words are empty without action. We must ensure that Volunteer Involving Organisations are resourced to recruit, train, manage and lead volunteers during an emergency. Further investment in the volunteering infrastructure, including platforms to recruit and match volunteers, is needed to enable a more responsive and coordinated approach.

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

Terms of Reference

That the following matter be referred to the Finance and Public Administration References Committee for inquiry and report by the last sitting day in 2021:

Lessons to be learned in relation to the preparation and planning for, response to and recovery efforts following the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season, with particular reference to:

- a) advice provided to the Federal Government, prior to the bushfires, about the level of bushfire risk this fire season, how and why those risks differed from historical norms, and measures that should be taken to reduce that risk in the future;
- b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;
- c) the Federal Government's response to recommendations from previous bushfire Royal Commissions and inquiries;
- d) the adequacy of the Federal Government's existing measures and policies to reduce future bushfire risk, including in relation to assessing, mitigating and adapting to expected climate change impacts, land use planning and management, hazard reduction, Indigenous fire practices, support for firefighters and other disaster mitigation measures;
- e) best practice funding models and policy measures to reduce future bushfire risk, both within Australia and internationally;
- f) existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency;
- g) the role and process of advising Government and the federal Parliament of scientific advice;
- h) an examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government's response to those impacts; and
- i) any related matters.

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

Glossary

COAG	The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia.
Formal volunteering	Time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain, taking place within organisations (including institutions and agencies) in a structured way.
Informal volunteering	Time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain, taking place outside the context of a formal organisation. This includes assisting people in the community, excluding one's own family members. For example, looking after children, property or pets; providing home or personal assistance; or giving someone professional advice.
The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement	The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement contain benchmarks specifically designed to help organisations attract, manage, recognise and retain volunteers, and to manage risk and safety with respect to volunteers.
Spontaneous emergency volunteers	People who seek or are invited to contribute their assistance before, during and/or after an emergency, and who are not affiliated with recognised volunteer agencies, and may or may not have relevant training, skills or experience.
VIOs	Volunteer Involving Organisations are organisations that utilise volunteers as part of their workforce.
VSSs	Volunteer support services (also known as volunteer resource centres or volunteer support organisations) provide place-based volunteer support services to volunteers and VIOs in their locality.

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Interim Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



Mr Mark Pearce
Interim Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This position statement has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires

Volunteering Australia Contacts

Mark Pearce
Interim Chief Executive Officer
ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org
0428 186 736

Sue Regan
Policy Manager
policy@volunteeringaustralia.org
0480 258 723

State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies

Volunteering ACT
www.volunteeringact.org.au
02 6251 4060
info@volunteeringact.org.au

Volunteering Tasmania
www.volunteeringtas.org.au
03 6231 5550
admin@volunteeringtas.org.au

The Centre for Volunteering (NSW)
www.volunteering.com.au
02 9261 3600
info@volunteering.com.au

Volunteering Victoria
www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au
03 8327 8500
info@volunteeringvictoria.org.au

Volunteering Queensland
www.volunteeringqld.org.au
07 3002 7600
reception@volunteeringqld.org.au

Volunteering WA
www.volunteeringwa.org.au
08 9482 4333
info@volunteeringwa.org.au

Volunteering SA&NT
www.volunteeringsa-nt.org.au
08 8221 7177
reception@volunteeringsa-nt.org.au