

# Submission on the second National Action Plan to implement the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework

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## Overview

Volunteers contribute extensively to disaster risk reduction in Australia, supporting prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery functions and bolstering community connection. However, the role of volunteers in disaster prevention and preparedness is not adequately recognised in existing policy initiatives. To meet the aims of the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, the second National Action Plan must include initiatives which support the role of volunteering and plan for its future. This submission recommends three nationally significant strategic initiatives to be included in the second National Action Plan:

- *The inclusion of comprehensive volunteering data in the data needs assessment and plan in the second National Action Plan.* Data on volunteering that supports disaster risk reduction is limited. Comprehensive data is needed to inform nationally significant policy initiatives and to support a sustainable volunteering ecosystem.
- *The establishment of a standing forum which includes volunteer organisations involved in national disaster risk reduction.* There are no current arrangements which plan strategically for and facilitate coordination between the volunteering ecosystem and other organisations with a role in disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Such a forum would support improved planning and more efficient and targeted support for volunteer involving organisations during times of heightened demand for services.
- *The development of an overarching national-level strategy which supports and plans for the role of volunteering in disaster risk reduction.* This should include funding to finalise the scoping, development, and implementation of the National Volunteer Sustainability Blueprint for Emergency Management.

## Introduction

### About the Second National Action Plan

In April 2019, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (the Framework) was released and subsequently endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments on 13 March 2020. The aim of the Framework was to guide national, whole-of-society efforts to proactively reduce disaster risk in order to minimise the loss and suffering caused by disasters. To support the implementation of the Framework, first National Action Plan was created, outlining a series of policy initiatives which support the four Framework Priorities:

1. Understand disaster risk
2. Accountable decisions
3. Enhanced investment
4. Governance, ownership and responsibility

In March 2022, the National Recovery and Resilience Agency began public consultations to inform the development of the Second National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction.

## About this submission

This submission responds to the discussion paper released by the National Recovery and Resilience Agency in May 2022.<sup>1</sup> It provides a summary of recent research on the role of volunteers in disaster risk reduction in Australia, and recommends three nationally significant strategic initiatives which would enable the volunteering ecosystem to support the aims of the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, in alignment with its guiding principles.

This submission responds primarily to the following questions from the discussion paper:

- Q1: *What do you understand your shared responsibility to be for reducing systemic disaster risk (for yourself, your organisation or on behalf of others) and ideally, what should collaboration look like?*
- Q3: *What is enabling your efforts to reduce disaster risks? Conversely, what is impeding your efforts to reduce disaster risks and why should it be addressed in the second National Action Plan?*
- Q4: *If the second National Action Plan included ~5 nationally significant strategic initiatives or actions to focus collective efforts over the next 2-5 years, what should they be? What would make the most difference nationally?*

## Question 1: The role of volunteering in reducing systemic disaster risk

Volunteers are involved in disaster risk reduction activities across prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. According to the most recent Report on Government Services, 233,284 people volunteered in government emergency services organisations in Australia in the 2020-21 financial year.<sup>2</sup> This number includes 200,780 volunteers in fire services organisations, 25,076 volunteers in State and Territory Emergency Service, and 7,428 volunteers in ambulance service organisations.

According to the ACNC Annual Information Statement (AIS) dataset, 217,776 volunteers are engaged in 1,192 registered charities which identified 'emergency and relief' as their main activity. This does not include any fire service or other government services organisations.<sup>3</sup>

A sustainable and well-integrated volunteer workforce is a crucial asset in disaster risk reduction. However, while the efforts of volunteers in disaster response and recovery are widely known, volunteers also contribute significantly to disaster prevention.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/9331/ndrrf-second-national-action-plan-discussion-paper-v1-final.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2022/emergency-management>

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-34b35c52-8af0-4cc1-aa0b-2278f6416d09/details?q=acnc>. The ACNC Annual Information Statement dataset is updated weekly. The figures presented in this report were accessed 11 April 2022.

## Volunteers in disaster prevention and preparedness

Volunteers contribute to disaster prevention in many ways. The most prominent example is volunteers in environmental organisations, who support sustainability efforts and contribute to natural disaster prevention. For example, in 2021, Landcare volunteers in the Snowy Monaro region planted over 4,500 native trees and shrubs.<sup>4</sup> This revegetation activity will help control the invasion of weeds, rehydrate and restore soil life, and abate approximately 3,277 tonnes of carbon over the next 25 years.<sup>5</sup> According to AIS data, 940,365 people volunteer in charities which identified 'environmental activities' as their main activity.<sup>6</sup>

To ensure a comprehensive approach to disaster risk reduction, collaboration on disaster prevention must therefore integrate volunteers and volunteer involving organisations. This means that volunteers should be included in relevant strategic initiatives, including strategies and action plans, in the disaster risk reduction space. Volunteer involving organisations should be engaged through standing forums on disaster risk reduction with other stakeholders with a role in disaster risk reduction. Further, membership of these forums should be expanded beyond the current focus on response and recovery to include organisations involved in prevention and preparedness activities. The role of volunteering in existing national disaster arrangements is discussed in greater detail below.

### Question 3: The need for volunteering data

At a national level, the availability of data on the involvement of volunteers enables evidence-based policy which supports disaster risk reduction. Available data on volunteering in government emergency management organisations shows that volunteers comprise around 90 per cent of Australia's fire and emergency service workforce, and that the number of volunteers in government fire services organisations has decreased gradually since 2015-16.<sup>7</sup> Official data informs key research on emergency volunteering, such as the *Enabling sustainable emergency volunteering* project from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre, which identified key trends and enables more informed policymaking.<sup>8</sup>

However, the limitations of available data also reduce the capacity to expand and better coordinate the role of volunteers. Despite the extensive role of volunteers in disaster risk reduction, precise data on the extent of volunteer involvement in disaster prevention and preparedness, disaster recovery, crisis intervention, and the provision of essential services during disasters is limited.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://landcareaustralia.org.au/news/2020-chep-land-management-and-sustainable-agriculture-landcare-grant/>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> The AIS dataset includes information on all charities which access Commonwealth charity tax concessions and other benefits and publishes a variety of statistics including the size of the charity, their main activity, and the number of paid staff and volunteers they engage; <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-34b35c52-8af0-4cc1-aa0b-2278f6416d09/details?q=acnc>

<sup>7</sup> Data taken from 2022 Report on Government Services for each year except 2010-2011, which was taken from the 2021 Report on Government Services

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/resilience-hazards/3533>

Data is collected by many different organisations, including the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), other Commonwealth Government departments and agencies, state, territory, and local governments, and the not-for-profit sector. The most precise official data on volunteering in emergency management settings comes from the Report on Government Services publications produced by the Productivity Commission, which include data on the number of volunteers in government emergency services organisations. However, this does not include data on volunteers in disaster prevention, preparedness, and recovery activities, or on volunteers in non-government organisations.

The other key official data source is the Annual Information Statement (AIS) database produced by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC). It includes the number of volunteers declared by all registered charities in Australia, categorised by the type of services they provide, and includes data on the number of volunteers in 'emergency and relief' organisations. However, this dataset does not include any information about the volunteers themselves, including demographic information, their reasons for volunteering, or the time they spend volunteering. Further, data on volunteers in other aspects of disaster risk reduction is not included in either of these datasets.

Where data is available, the figures represent only the confirmed numbers of volunteers involved in formal organisations. Further, due to different data collection methods, it is difficult to estimate the total number of volunteers involved in disaster risk reduction. However, with 940,365 volunteers in environmental charities alone, it is very likely that the total number is well over one million.

Data-driven decision making is a guiding principle of the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework.<sup>9</sup> As such, facilitating the engagement of volunteers and planning appropriately for their involvement in disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery requires more detailed, comparable, and up-to-date data on volunteering. Any initiative which advances the data landscape for disaster risk reduction should include plans to assess and develop comprehensive data on volunteering in the space.

## Question 4: Coordinating volunteer involvement

Establishing shared and defined responsibilities for disaster risk reduction is a guiding principle of the Framework.<sup>10</sup> This must include a vision for volunteering and clear responsibilities for the relevant actors within the volunteering ecosystem. The establishment of a standing forum for volunteering organisations and groups and the development of an overarching national-level strategy, which supports and plans for the role of volunteering in disaster risk reduction, should be included in the Second National Action Plan.

### A standing forum for volunteer organisations

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements made the following recommendation on the inclusion of volunteers in national arrangements:

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<sup>9</sup> <https://recovery.gov.au/sites/default/files/national-disaster-risk-reduction-framework.pdf>, 8

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

*Recommendation 21.3 – National coordination forums: The Australian Government, through the mechanism of the proposed standing national recovery and resilience agency, should convene regular and ongoing national forums for charities, non-government organisations and volunteer groups, with a role in natural disaster recovery, with a view to continuous improvement of coordination of recovery support.*

Volunteer involving organisations are included in various coordination forums. Major volunteer involving organisations are represented through the National Coordination Mechanism, which was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic and is now embedded in the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework.<sup>11</sup> The National Coordination Mechanism convenes collaborative forums with relevant sectors including the community sector to address the impacts of a national crisis. The National Coordination Mechanism was activated during recent floods in Queensland and New South Wales.

Volunteer involving organisations involved in emergency relief and recovery are also represented on the Emergency Relief National Coordination Group, established by the Department of Social Services. The National Coordination Group provides advice to Government on how providing emergency relief, food relief, and financial counselling during times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters.<sup>12</sup>

While these groups facilitate some representation for the volunteering ecosystem in national disaster risk reduction, they are only activated in response to crises. Consequently, there are no regular standing forums which coordinate the efforts of charities, non-government organisations, and volunteer groups, with a role in natural disaster response and recovery, and there is no representation or coordination of volunteer efforts in disaster prevention and preparedness activities.

### Strategic planning for volunteering in disaster risk reduction

Further, there is currently no overarching national-level strategy which supports and plans for the role of volunteering in disaster risk reduction. In January 2021, funding was provided by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre to conduct a scoping consultation about the concept and process to develop a National Volunteer Sustainability Blueprint, which would aim to provide national level strategic direction for initiatives to support sustainable volunteering in the emergency management sector. Funding to finalise the scoping, development, and implementation of the Blueprint, and similar strategic initiatives, is needed to progress the strategic consideration of volunteering in disaster risk reduction.

Volunteering Australia is currently leading the development of a new National Strategy for Volunteering. The National Strategy for Volunteering will provide strategic direction for all sectors within the volunteering ecosystem from aged care to community sport. A National Volunteer

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/aus-gov-crisis-management-framework-v3-1-2.pdf>, 45

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dss.gov.au/communities-and-vulnerable-people-programs-services-emergency-relief/national-coordination-group>

Sustainability Blueprint for Emergency Management would complement this and provide actions focused on addressing the specific challenges being faced in emergency management.

## Recommendations

1. Include detailed data on volunteering in the development of an integrated disaster risk reduction database.
  - a. This should draw upon key official data sources and include collaboration with the ecosystem to address data gaps.
  - b. Key data gaps are: the number of volunteers in prevention activities, the types of roles volunteers perform in prevention and preparedness, and the role of informal volunteers.
2. Establish a standing national forum which connects volunteer involving organisations and informal volunteers with other organisations with a responsibility for disaster risk reduction activities.
3. Assign funding for the development of an overarching national-level strategy which supports and plans for the role of volunteering in disaster risk reduction. This should include funding to finalise the scoping, development, and implementation of the National Volunteer Sustainability Blueprint.

## Authorisation

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



Mr Mark Pearce  
Chief Executive Officer

## Endorsements

This submission 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.

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