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# Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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**Consent option:** Publish with name

**Submitted by:** Outward Bound Australia

## **Q1. What experience have you had with Commonwealth disaster funding support?**

Outward Bound Australia was significantly impacted by the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires. Our operational areas were burnt out in Northern NSW, ACT and Victoria - we lost 4 months of revenue and faced financial disaster - then COVID hit. We were successful applying for a \$500,000 disaster relief loan (through QRIDA), which took nearly 6 months and heartbreaking mountains of paperwork. We were also successful applying for 2 bushfire disaster relief grants: firstly to re-establish our base that was burnt out on the Snowy River in Victoria, and secondly to build facilities at our campus in Tharwa ACT to enable campus based programs as a part of establishing a more resilient operations. Finally, we have been successful with a funding grant to support Outward Bound to establish a National Centre for Outdoor Risk and Readiness (NatCORR), to help support the outdoor education sector to prepare for greater climate risk. These grants have all been extremely useful, but the amount of work associated is big. They have also required part funding and resource support from Outward Bound, which is challenging in a context where we are rebuilding. We are extremely grateful for the support - it really is making an enormous difference.

## **Q2. How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?**

The outdoor sector is really facing an uphill battle - as the bush where we operate is becoming increasingly volatile and risky. The sector is fragmented and distributed, and at different stages of maturity in terms of awareness and capacity to adapt and change. The risk management context for us is extremely complicated - with many different land managers, emergency responders, regulations and sources of information. These vary widely across different state jurisdictions, making it challenging for organisations such as Outward Bound, who operate Nationally and hike across invisible State/Territory borders. We need greater co-ordination and improved communication mechanisms. Funding support could go to peak industry bodies and organisations such as NatCORR to boost an understanding of what change is required and support the sector through professional development and change management.

## **Q3. Please describe your understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes.**

I believe that it is funded via publicised grant rounds on the website, that have specific eligibility criteria and policy alignment agendas. These grants require significant investment and work to demonstrate credible plans to achieve outcomes. The grants are then assessed and prioritised by public servants and are recommended to government aligned with policy priorities. This is how it should work! However, in





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recent years publicity associated with various grants rorts have undermined public confidence in the independence of government funding processes. Hopefully, this can be addressed with the new government.

**Q4. Are the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events clear?**

The various roles of the different jurisdictions are not at all clear. It has felt extremely challenging navigating support through different jurisdictions - and it feels unfair and unevenly distributed. On many occasions we have felt significantly hamstrung by being located in the ACT, which lacks the budget support opportunities of the larger states. At other times, we realise that we have not capitalised on State budget opportunities - because we are overwhelmed with the complexity and work required - staying on top of and applying for grants in 3 -4 different places. For example, we have only receive \$11,000 in total from the Victorian State Government to replace composting toilets on a site that experienced hundreds of thousands of loss in business function. Many grants excluded Outward Bound because they were targeted to large industry sectors or circumstances that don't apply to an outdoor education organisation. The most ridiculous example is when the ACT government based COVID relief grant funding off water use rates (for recreation and tourism providers), where we are on our own water supply in a rural location. They then adapted this requirement by adjusting the funding level based on the number of 'flushable toilets' we have on site as a proxy for revenue / use. This was again non-sense for us, as our participants journey in the bush where flushable toilets are not a thing! This kind of bureaucracy adds significantly to the emotional trauma associated with trying to cope during a disaster recovery period.

**Q5. Is there any further information you would like to provide?**

The time it takes between disaster hitting and securing funding support is way too long, and for us, it was nearly a nail in a coffin. I am an experienced and highly competent administrator with years of working within the university sector (MBA, CPA, and Phd qualified), yet the process for receiving the initial \$500,000 disaster support loan nearly beat me and had me in tears on a number of occasions. I have no idea how a farmer or small business owner might have managed to successfully navigate this process, or managed the burden of other grant application processes. I joke about the fact that I have 'grant writing' PTSD following the bushfires and COVID, but I suspect that there is truth in this fact. It has been extremely hard work steering a 60+ year old not-for-profit organisation through this challenging period of disaster - through a transformation process to set it up with a vision that is resilient and ready for a volatile climatic context. Any help that the government can continue to give is very much needed and appreciated. Streamlining the process across the jurisdictions, making it transparent and more timely would be on enormous value to the community - so that we can get back to providing the community support that we provide Australians to get our kids out into the bush at a time when they need it now more than ever. Thanks so much

