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Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Regional Development Australia - Southern Inland

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

Regional Development Australia Southern Inland (RDASI) is represented by local leaders and staff who are passionate about the communities in the Southern Inland region of New South Wales (NSW). RDASI is part of a national network of 52 Regional Development Australia (RDA) Boards across Australia, and its role is to support the Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the Southern Inland region of NSW, including Wingecarribee, Goulburn Mulwaree, Upper Lachlan, Hilltops, Yass Valley, Queanbeyan-Palerang, and Snowy Monaro. RDASI works with all levels of government, business, and community groups to promote economic and social development in the region by facilitating regional projects, collaboration, communication, and advocacy.

As with many regions across Australia, an unprecedented series of disasters has had devastating impacts on communities across the entire RDA Southern Inland region, affecting individuals and businesses beyond belief. As a result, the RDA Southern Inland team identified a need to develop a service that improved the dissemination and accessibility of information for businesses struggling in an uncertain economy.

Business Southern Inland - BusSi, a region-centric portal provides support to time-poor businesses in the region to connect with others and access business support and information, including networking opportunities, commonwealth and state grants and funding, start-up support, events, news and a business forum.

BusSi provides carefully curated, useful and up-to-date information, including the availability of Commonwealth disaster funding support, which is crucial during times of crisis, to support business owners to reduce disaster risk, enhance resilience, and protect lives and assets.

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

Commonwealth funding can play a crucial role in supporting communities to reduce disaster risk, enhance resilience, and protect lives and assets. Support could be delivered through programs and initiatives such as:





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- * **Infrastructure Resilience:** Increasing the resilience of critical infrastructure to help reduce damage and disruption during disasters, to ensure the continuity of essential services and minimise recovery costs. This could include funding to enhance existing infrastructure or incorporating resilience features into new construction projects.
- * **Community Education and Awareness:** Community education and awareness programs to provide information on preparedness, evacuation procedures, early warning systems, and resilience-building strategies to help community members make informed decisions, take appropriate actions, and actively participate in disaster risk reduction efforts.
- * **Capacity Building:** Capacity building programs, workshops, and exercises to equip individuals and groups with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively prepare, respond, and recover from disasters.
- * **Grants and Financial Assistance:** Support for community-based initiatives, local resilience plans, improvements to homes and buildings, sustainable solutions and risk reduction measures through grants and loans.
- * **Risk Assessment and Mapping:** Support comprehensive risk assessments and the development of hazard maps to help identify high-risk areas and enable communities to better understand the potential hazards within their regions. Support for communities to access accurate risk information to help them make informed decisions about land use, planning, infrastructure development, and emergency preparedness.
- * **Research and Innovation:** Support for research and innovation initiatives that focus on disaster risk reduction, such as scientific studies, technological advancements, and innovative solutions that contribute to understanding and mitigating risks.

We understand that Commonwealth support is provided in some capacity for most of the above-mentioned programs or initiatives.

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

We understand that the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements 2018, which came into effect on November 1, 2018, were established jointly by the Australian Government and state or territory governments, with the aim to alleviate the financial burden on the affected states or territories and provide urgent financial assistance to communities affected by disasters.

The responsibility for determining which areas receive assistance and what kind of assistance is available to individuals and communities lies with the respective state or territory government.

In cases where the arrangements have been activated, the Australian Government may fund up to 75 percent of the available assistance for individuals and communities. This financial contribution is provided through various assistance measures, including:

- * Personal hardship and distress assistance to support individuals and families.
- * Counter disaster operations including the coordination and implementation of emergency response measures.





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- * Concessional loans or interest subsidies for small businesses and primary producers to help them recover and rebuild.
- * Transport freight subsidies for primary producers to assist with the transportation of goods and produce.
- * Loans and grants to businesses, non-profit organisations and individuals.
- * Reconstruction of essential public assets that have been damaged or destroyed during the disaster.
- * Community recovery funds for community-based recovery projects and initiatives.
- * Clean-up and recovery grants to support businesses in cleaning up the affected area, replacing damaged equipment and stock, and carrying out general repairs.

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

While the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local governments during disaster events are generally outlined and defined in policies, agreements, and funding arrangements and relatively easy to find for those with an understanding of these areas, the specific funding roles of each government organisation may not be easy to find or understand for community members, especially when under the added stress brought on by disasters.

While it may not be crucial for community members to have an in-depth understanding of the specific funding roles of the Commonwealth (Australian Government), states and territories, and local governments during disaster events, having a general awareness can be beneficial by empowering them to navigate the recovery process, engage effectively with relevant authorities, and contribute to building more resilient communities.

Understanding funding roles can:

- * Provide community members with an idea of the types of assistance available to support them during times of crisis and during their recovery efforts, and who to contact if they need assistance in accessing the support.
- * Empower community members to engage with the relevant government entity to advocate for their needs. This could include actively participating in discussions, community meetings, or consultations related to disaster response and recovery.
- * Enable community members to voice their concerns and priorities to the relevant organisation and ensure they are considered during decision-making processes.
- * Assist community members to set realistic expectations regarding the financial support available.
- * Empower community members to hold governments accountable for fulfilling responsibilities and ensuring that adequate resources are allocated for recovery and mitigation efforts.
- * Enable community members to actively collaborate with local and regional authorities, community organisations, and relevant stakeholders to leverage available funding, identify gaps, and develop effective strategies for disaster risk reduction and resilience-building initiatives.





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* Inform community members during the preparedness phase, so they can consider potential funding sources and mechanisms available to support preparedness efforts and the development of community-based initiatives to reduce disaster risks.

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

Some Local Government Areas (LGAs) within the RDA Southern Inland region were not declared disaster zones by the NSW State Government under Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, despite being severely impacted as a result of the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires.

The impacts ranged from community members not being able to access disaster relief support, the loss of goods and income due to smoke taint right through to access and supply restrictions due to prolonged road closures. Local councils responsible for roads with access points in disaster declared areas were able to access funding for road maintenance and repairs, however, neighbouring councils in areas not deemed a disaster effected zone, were unable to access funding needed to repair sections of the same road within their LGA.

The Upper Lachlan Shire Council (ULSC) was severely impacted by the bushfires; however, the area was not initially declared a disaster zone. After vigorous advocating from local and regional representatives, the ULSC area was declared a disaster effected area, allowing residents, business owners and council the opportunity to access vital disaster relief funding and support. Unfortunately, by the time the decision was made, many funding and support opportunities had closed.

Disasters do not respect LGA boundaries. LGA boundaries should not be used to determine which communities are eligible for disaster relief and support. LGA boundaries should be used as a guide, one of many tools used to determine who can apply for support during times of need.

