



Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Sarsfield Community Association Inc.

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

Many members of the Sarsfield Community Association (and we have some 100 persons) experienced losses during the Black Summer Bushfires 2019/2020. Our area had consisted of some 276 homes, 181 families, totalling 625 residents and with the fire damaging just over 200 properties and destroying 60 homes, the fires almost removed our entire community. We had about 100 adults and 20 children displaced, and many are still taking a long time to get back, and some will never return.

Regarding funding, we all received funds from many community sources as well as insurance company pay outs and money from the Commonwealth disaster funds. Some of these funds were slow to come to us, as we had to complete forms, be checked out, etc., all during a very traumatic time.

Our experience with Commonwealth disaster funding initially was very bad indeed. It is very well documented that our application for funding was rejected because of the wrong ABN used in the application and because of that, we were initially denied the \$3.6M grant request. We campaigned very strongly and eventually had that funding returned and are now busy resolving the planning phase of our facility rebuild. That experience left our community questioning how people can sit in bureaucratic offices and be so heartless – and then keep their jobs. Our experience showed there was no compassion whatsoever and the word 'support' was a joke. Also, because of the time lag in receiving the funds, we are finding that current cost increases will potentially see us not able to build what was initially planned. Can we access another grant if there is a shortfall in funding?

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

Funding could be used to build safer areas for bushfires shelter; to erect approved flood barriers; to clear roadside trees and vegetation and so many more tasks within the mitigation area of disaster management and risk. Funding could also be used to put some of the previous Royal Commission findings into place to ensure our safety. Just one example is the recommendation that we should 'strengthen the range of options available in the face of fire, including community refuges, bushfire shelters and evacuation and to ensure that local solutions are tailored and known to communities through local bushfire planning'.



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Even many of the 1939 fires Royal Commission's recommendations have never been implemented and so it goes on. Someone else said 'Maybe we save money by not having Royal Commissions and put those dollars into community recovery after the event'.

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

It is designed, supposedly, to 'Support families and communities across Australia in disaster recovery in the hope that it will enhance and strengthen their resilience and hopefully that will lessen the impact of future disasters'. Again, one member said 'It is a cumbersome process that pits families and communities against one another in the race to receive funding assistance after the event. Compassion is hard to find sometimes in any of this as it is a Government Department with staff just doing a job.'

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

Not very clear, mainly because people only become involved in the system after an event and have no need to study up all the information that is available during normal times. It is therefore important that as soon as a large-scale disaster occurs, a very clear concise message is disseminated that combines all the funding assistance available, both governments (of all persuasions) and organisations (Red Cross, Salvo's, etc). Many years ago, our local municipality plans saw all agencies organised to travel together to disaster sites to gather information and this allowed those affected by the event to answer questions once – instead of the current situation where each organisation collects their own information and become a nuisance/hinderance to recovery, instead of support. All government agencies need to address this issue.

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

It is important that those affected by the disaster event are not required to complete forms, forms, and more forms for each grant available. It is easy to determine the affected properties following an event and owners should not have to 'prove' their claim each time a new grant becomes available. Likewise, communities should not be pitted against each other to fight for funding to restore infrastructure, etc., especially when having to compile lengthy submissions to obtain funding. These submissions are expected by authorities at a time when individuals are trying to resolve their personal issues and then are expected to work for their community re-build too. The type of information required is such that grant writers must be employed, and that takes away money from the badly needed funds.

One of our members said, 'Surely a grant is a grant; not something we have to beg for or prove we need, and Government departments can visit communities affected by the disaster and complete their own forms for our grant'!

Also, many examples of 'hard to fathom grants' are available within East Gippsland following the fires. Much needed funds were distributed to areas within our municipality that had not been directly affected by the disaster. Why would a jetty on the Gippsland Lakes (that was not burnt) be funded; why would the East Gippsland Shire Council received some \$9M for their airfield when the fire did not get any closer than about 30 kilometres away. There are numerous other examples of this occurring, and the funding came from the Commonwealth Disaster Recovery grants that took money from those in real need.

