



Australian Government

National Emergency  
Management Agency

# Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

**Response ID:** IRCDF\_1411\_156

**Consent option:** Publish with name

**Submitted by:** Murray River Council

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

In December 2022 Council wrote to the Prime Minister, Deputy PM, NSW Cross Border Commissioner, Minister for Emergency Management, Minister for Regional NSW, Minister for Tourism, Deputy Federal Leader, Minister for Agriculture, Minister for Flood Recovery, the NSW Premier and the NSW Small Business Commissioner seeking urgent support on behalf of businesses located within the Murray River, Berrigan, Federation and Edward River Council local government areas.

The border businesses, mainly in the accommodation and hospitality sector suffered cumulative impacts of COVID-19 and prolonged inundation whilst somewhere unable to operate due to isolation by floodwaters.

Council advocated strongly for funding in line with the DRFA arrangements in Victoria:

- \* In Victoria, rural landholders were eligible for grants up to \$25,000 (limited to \$10,000 in NSW);
- \* In Victoria, small business could apply for disaster relief loans up to \$250,000 (limited to \$130,000 in NSW);
- \* In Victoria, medium sized businesses directly impacted by flood could obtain up to \$200,000 as well as additional support services including business recovery plans, mental health assistance and grant writing assistance. (There was no equivalent funding assistance available to medium sized businesses in NSW).
- \* There was, and still is, NO funding available for businesses who were unable to trade due to isolation however remain unaffected by inundation.

Businesses in Murray River Council, again, find themselves experiencing a current high-water event that was avoidable!

To date, MRC has received:

- Australian Disaster Recovery Allowance: \$352,355
- Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payments: \$269,600
- Small Business Grants: \$445,932
- Primary Producer Grants: \$6,840,000





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Many small businesses applied for the first \$25,000 support package however were reluctant to apply for the second \$25,000 for fear of being deemed ineligible. The application process was onerous. Due to the cumulative impact of adverse events businesses are not interested in taking on concessional loans.

In February 2023, Council wrote to Emergency Recovery Victoria and the Cross Border Commissioner to seek Disaster Relief Australia assistance to fill the gap between what the Victorian taxpayers are paying for via ERV and what would be undertaken in NSW.

In June 2023, Council wrote to the Minister for Emergency Services, now eight months after the flood event seeking urgent support. We've had numerous ministerial visitors and spoken about businesses that have fallen into the funding gaps. Houseboat operators, paddlesteamer operators and businesses reliant upon the river who were cut off and isolated for many months, unable to trade. The Medium Size Business Grant, based on the number of full-time employees doesn't align to the most heavily impacted businesses in our region such as commercial caravan parks. Approx 90% of businesses in Murray River have less than 20 FTEs. The minimum number to access this grant is 21 FTEs. Whilst we did advocate strongly for the medium size business grant to be released by NSW (in line with our Victorian neighbours) we did push for the eligibility criteria NOT to be reliant upon FTE numbers.

To date we have not received a response.

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

Through the development and provision of Recovery and Resilience programs for communities who need it the most.

A dedicated response program, with triggers in place, so businesses can be confident that support measures exist and will kick in as/when required.

Precedents already exist in other parts of NSW.

A Murray River Region Resilience Initiative:

- Cumulative impacts of drought, COVID-19 and the October 2022 flood event has had a devastating impact on small business operators in our region. Businesses predominantly in the agriculture, tourism and hospitality sectors.
- Critical Infrastructure/Local Government Grants - funding to support construction, maintenance and repair of levy systems - capacity and options for upgrades, upgrades to pumps and pump stations.
- Detailed evacuation planning, including trigger points for resilience and recovery actions.
- Community - funding for resilience activities, infrastructure for emergency evacuation/community centres to provide safe space for crisis information sharing/refuge away from flood prone or unsafe spaces.
- Tourism Grants for infrastructure to future proof event spaces and aid economic recovery.
- Road closure signage - road closures cause panic and states don't have the same up to date/current information for visitors;
- Business - disaster recovery funding for business support officers, stimulus funding for activities/events for economic recovery, funding for businesses unable to trade due to isolation but not directly inundated and/or impacted by flood/fire/another adverse event.





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-Brand - damage caused by river management, management of water upstream is a federal issue! Air space should be carefully considered and planned through consultation with key stakeholders impacted downstream.

-Nature based - river bank stabilisation, tree assessment and removal.

From a Local Government perspective, Champions should be allocated to a local government area or region. These champions should be empowered to approve financial expenditure as it happens so there is no argument between state and federal governments during the reconciliation of funds.

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

During crises, NSW Government inconsistent with support requested from Federal Government. Precedents have been set for disasters in various regions across the state.

The October 2022 flood event, other states i.e. Vic, SA, WA were quick to seek support.

Commonwealth has triggers in place for all disaster categories. States don't align.

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

NO.

There is no coordinated approach to states seeking commonwealth funding support. Cross border communities continue to suffer from decisions made by state governments.

With the October 2022 flood event, Victoria, South Australia and even Western Australian were very quick to respond to business and community needs and implemented co-funded arrangements for this communities. In NSW, some response in Northern areas of the state. Little or no response to the dire situation in the Murray River region.

We live and work in twin towns. One community with a river running between used as a state border. Residents live on one side of the border and commute to work on the other side yet depending which side you choose to live is dependent on whether the state government will provide support.

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

At the time of submission, Council is yet to receive a response from the NSW Reconstruction Authority or NSW Minister for Emergency Services.

The Murray River region has been overlooked/forgotten. This is the sentiment of businesses from various industries across our local government footprint.

NEMA Regional Coordination and Planning Officers have been a great support network for Council since the flood event in October 2022 and continue to be until today. Our Regional Officers have continued to listen to our business community and have strongly advocated for support from decision makers. We

will continue to advocate strongly for our business community in an attempt to aid economic recovery for the Murray River region.

