

22 May 2020

Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
By email: [fpa.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:fpa.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Sir/Madam

**Submission – Lessons to be learned in relation to the preparation and planning for, response to and recovery efforts following the 2019-20 bushfire season.**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) was established in 2000 to bring together philanthropy, government and business to support rural, regional and remote communities. It has done this predominantly by making grants to local not-for-profit groups for community-led projects and providing capacity-building support to help communities strengthen, adapt, evolve, innovate and renew.

Since being established, FRRR has distributed more than \$100M in grants (which are typically leveraged at least three-times either cash or in kind by the grantees) to around 10,000 projects. From a disaster recovery context, FRRR has actively supported communities in their recovery from disasters since 2006, awarding more than \$19 million in grants, with most of these grants focussed on addressing medium to long-term recovery needs, and many focused on preparedness initiatives.

From this direct experience with communities, FRRR knows that the places affected by the 2019-20 bushfires across Australia will need support for many years to come. However, the impacts of the fires will not be the same in any two communities.

A significant proportion of grants FRRR has made were – and continue to be - to support community recovery following the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Over time, FRRR has seen community needs evolve through the recovery journey - from the immediacy of emergency relief (food, water, shelter, and medicines), to early recovery (temporary accommodation, children returning to school, adaptation to a 'new normal'), to medium-to-long-term recovery (rebuilding of permanent physical structures, children return to school buildings, adults have renewed opportunities to improve their livelihoods and local economies begin to recover, although there is still significant trauma), and preparedness for future disasters. More than 10 years on from those fires, FRRR are supporting economic recovery, mental health initiatives and projects to keep young people engaged in school or employment. Whilst the exact needs will vary from community to community, FRRR anticipates that this cycle of changing needs over time will be evident in the recovery of the 2019-20 fire affected communities.

FRRR is focused on medium to long-term recovery, typically providing funds 12-18 months after a disaster event. This is a deliberate approach, as we have found that this stage of support is typically an under-funded area of support, and in providing grants to not-for-profits to advance their community-identified initiatives, this is most appropriately timed once individual recovery needs are addressed, allowing attention to focus on what support is required in the community.

Below we have shared some insights and suggestions that we have on some of the key points being considered. Should you like further information, please contact us directly.

Yours sincerely

  
Natalie Egleton  
Chief Executive Officer

**In this response, FRRR has limited its submission to the following terms of reference, namely:**

- (b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;
- (d) the adequacy of the Federal Government’s existing measures and policies to reduce future bushfire risk, including in relation to assessing, mitigating and adapting to expected climate change impacts, land use planning and management, hazard reduction, Indigenous fire practices, support for firefighters and other disaster mitigation measures;
- (e) best practice funding models and policy measures to reduce future bushfire risk, both within Australia and internationally;
- (f) existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency;
- (h) an examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government’s response to those impacts; and
- any related matters.

**(b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;**

As a general principle, FRRR believes that local people are best placed to understand what is needed in their community – both during the normal course of events, and in a crisis.

FRRR acknowledges the important and essential role that Federal and State Governments play in policy setting and in facilitating coordination of emergency services. FRRR also acknowledges that local governments are the level of government closest to communities and the specific needs of their communities, yet they are increasingly being asked to do more on the ground, often with fewer resources.

There is also limited understanding in the community more broadly about the respective roles and responsibilities of each tier of Government and how these operate in cross-jurisdictional incidents, such as was experienced in the 2019-20 bushfires. Anecdotally, FRRR is aware of issues during the most recent fires where the fire front was crossing state borders. Primary producers with properties that run across borders needed to monitor and comply with two emergency management systems and structures – each with different requirements, and those bodies often use different communication channels. We also heard stories of people who were volunteer fire-fighters or support workers not being allowed to cross borders to fight fires, despite their border-straddling community being at risk.

In its history of funding community-based emergency infrastructure, FRRR has funded many requests from community groups for equipment such as communication support (including the likes of UHF radios, mobile phone or transmission towers for local community radio); generators and other power infrastructure (including solar solutions) for emergency relief or evacuation centres; upgrades of those centres (such as kitchens, bathrooms and disabled access). The availability of adequate equipment both for firefighting and for supporting affected communities to find a place of safety is an area that needs to be closely monitored and supported by Government with a localised lens as not all communities have the same needs.

We note the recent establishment of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency, and the work of the state agencies, such as the Victorian Bushfire Recovery agency and Resilient NSW. Those working in the sector, such as FRRR and others who support communities, would welcome a greater understanding the responsibilities of each and how they connect to other agencies already in existence (such as Emergency Management Victoria and the Office of Emergency Management in NSW), in order to minimise confusion or duplication.

We also note that there is a separate drought agency and now a dedicated COVID-19 agency. In many respects each of these three agencies will be working on the same things – building capacity and coordinating support during the events and recovery following the events. We suggest there is a need to clarify the role of all these agencies, particularly for the long-term, given it is likely there will be future cross-jurisdictional disasters. We believe there is a need for a proactive, forward-looking national agency with all-hazards lens. In the short-term, however, there needs to be a high degree of coordination between these agencies. The requests for input to each body, and representatives, takes up valuable community energy, particularly at a time when local leaders are stretched.

**(d) the adequacy of the Federal Government’s existing measures and policies to reduce future bushfire risk, including in relation to assessing, mitigating and adapting to expected climate change impacts, land use planning and management, hazard reduction, Indigenous fire practices, support for firefighters and other disaster mitigation measures;**

FRRR would like to highlight the importance of strong community level leadership – before, during and after disaster events. These leaders are often informal yet trusted, respected and known within communities, and are therefore able to mobilise resources, information and action on the ground.

Leadership exists within every community but is not always harnessed and developed to the same level. This is influenced by many factors and there is a need for greater resourcing of locally led efforts. From FRRR’s observations and early engagement with fire affected communities, those with more developed and ready community leadership capacity were able to react more quickly as the bushfires approached, and to take a coordinated approach to keeping their people safe. Those communities have also been able to proactively take control of their recovery and attract resources from outside their community to support their recovery.

For example, in Mallacoota, the community is marshalling support on many fronts – including providing avenues for young people to support one another and addressing teen mental health. In Corryong, they are working collaboratively to fundraise for community-agreed priority recovery actions with the guidance of their 2030 strategic plan.

For the last three years, FRRR has been piloting a disaster preparedness program, in partnership with the Office of Emergency Management in NSW and a number of philanthropic donors, called Disaster Resilient: Future Ready (DR:FR). One of the pilot communities was North Richmond, who were in the midst of coordinating neighbourhood preparedness activities when the Summer bushfires started. The community had been proactively building its networks and was able to action these networks to respond as the fires (and then floods) approached. FRRR is about to expand the DR:FR program with pilot communities in Victoria.

In another example, Orara, outside Coffs Harbour, is well placed for recovery as they have an active and connected Progress Association, and a clear understanding of what they need. They have identified the importance of having a person employed within the community to ensure a coordinated approach. FRRR has recently provided a grant to enable this role to be established. This is a great example of strong local leadership.

## **(e) best practice funding models and policy measures to reduce future bushfire risk, both within Australia and internationally;**

Natural disasters have a significant impact upon rural, regional and remote areas. Yet, traditionally, it is these areas where the capacity to invest in preparedness or fund recovery is limited. FRRR strongly believes that there needs to be greater policy focus on preparing for disasters at an individual and community level, and investment in locally-led approaches that build preparedness and resilience in concert with regional strategies and plans.

Research shows that communities that are well-prepared, have strong social capital and understand the emergency management system and the community's role are better able to recover<sup>1</sup>. This includes investment in things like community emergency plans, community leadership programs, and practical training programs such as chainsaw handling, mental health first aid and governance for not-for-profit organisations. These kinds of initiatives help communities take control in the event of a disaster.

While the cost / benefit of investing in community level preparedness is not always immediately apparent, FRRR has observed time and time again, that it makes a significant difference.

There are many aspects and components to community level preparedness. FRRR suggests the following are of particular importance:

- **strong local leadership.**

FRRR has funded significant leadership development programs, often off the back of natural disasters. For example, the Alpine Valleys Leadership program was conceived following the 2009 Victorian bushfires. This ensured that when fires again affected these communities in 2019-20, there was a strong, connected community ready to move into action. We've seen this too in other communities, such as the South Burnett in Queensland, where the Red Earth Community Foundation established a leadership program following the 2013 floods. Communities benefiting from strong local leadership programs are seen to have strongly coordinated and 'linked-up' community sectors, with a future focused mindset.

- **community level planning, and community engagement in the development and activation of the plans.**

In recent years, FRRR has funded a number of communities to engage in whole-of-community level planning. However, more needs to occur. There is rich knowledge held locally - networks, programs, activities, connections. We believe whole-of-community planning that represents more than just the forecasted infrastructure needs of a community need to be a priority, hence piloting the Disaster Resilient: Future Ready program, and Investing in Rural Community Futures program over recent years. FRRR also strongly supports the need to engage the local Indigenous community in all aspects of disaster preparedness, especially drawing on local land management practices.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Vella K, Dale A, Cottrell A, Gooch M, editors. Assessing community resilience to climate change. 12th International Coral Reef Symposium; 2012; Cairns, Australia, and Price-Robertson R, Knight K. Natural disasters and community resilience. Canberra: Child Family Community Australia (CFCA), 2012.

- **appropriate infrastructure – such as localised communications equipment, well-equipped emergency services appropriately-equipped emergency evacuation centre/s, and alternative power sources.**

FRRR has funded significant amounts of emergency equipment, communications equipment and upgrades to local community facilities that serve as evacuation or refuge centres – most frequently after a disaster event. The need is evident through the applications for support FRRR receives following every natural disaster, but FRRR questions holistically whether this is the most appropriate use of philanthropic capital, which could be otherwise directed to pilot and test new initiatives that otherwise are not funded by Government due to their uncertainty risk. FRRR also believes that community groups seek support from FRRR because of streamlined and straightforward application processes, and encourages Governments to continue to invest in reducing the administrative burden encountered by community groups seeking support to upgrade or update their equipment and infrastructure.

- **local knowledge of the environment, to facilitate environmental recovery in the event of a natural disaster.**

Citizen science projects, which identify and quantify local plant and animal species, is traditionally a chronically under-funded activity. The Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network report that only 2.5 per cent of all charitable donations and bequests are directed to supporting the environment<sup>2</sup>. However, when work has been done to capture this information, communities are better able to preserve, protect and regenerate their local environment.

#### **(f) existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency;**

FRRR commends the National Bushfire Recovery Agency's ability to establish quickly and to step into a coordinating role, which was critical, given the fires were cross-jurisdictional. FRRR's interactions with the agency have been positive.

Initially, the agency set up a series of roundtables, each with a different focus. Alongside other national charities, working across all focus areas, FRRR sits on the charities' roundtable. We welcome this opportunity to have input into strategy and policy settings and for FRRR, we appreciate the opportunity to put forward the perspective of rural, regional and remote community groups, who often can't access philanthropic support.

We believe the optimal role of the Agency is to better coordinate information sharing, and to iron out any inefficiencies or aspects inhibiting recovery, as best it can. FRRR has appreciated the opportunity to raise issues, promote concerns told to FRRR by communities and have the Agency take on those concerns.

#### **Charity coordination**

FRRR also participated in a number of formalised roundtables that focused on the coordination of charities in responding to the 2019-20 bushfires. In addition to these roundtables, FRRR's CEO and senior management spoke with a number of responding agencies throughout the Summer, and advised a number of organisations who were coordinating or establishing vehicles through which philanthropic support could be directed. These formal and informal conversations contributed insight to FRRR's response.

<sup>2</sup> AEGN, Environmental Giving Trends, 2020

## FRRR's response

In terms of how FRRR responded to the 2019-20 bushfires, FRRR took a multi-faceted approach. During the fires, FRRR encouraged our donor partners to consider splitting their contribution, directing some toward more immediate support, and a portion toward medium to longer-term impacts.

FRRR has raised more than \$12.47M in total for disaster recovery through the 2019-20 bushfire season, with support coming from a mix of corporations, foundations and individuals.

- Since September 2019, FRRR has attracted more than \$3.5M into its relatively new Disaster Resilience & Recovery Fund - a perpetual fund, which will be invested, and returns from the fund will be used to ensure that there are always funds available to support communities following a disaster.
- For donors that wanted to support more immediate needs or be able to identify which specific projects their funds supported, FRRR accepted donations to its flagship Strengthening Rural Communities program. We raised more than \$6.5M. This program can fund a wide range of projects, such as enhancing a local emergency shelter, implementing a UHF radio system so that people can stay in touch during the next emergency, efforts to relieve volunteer fatigue or running a campaign to attract people back to the area. The first applications for funding are currently being readied for consideration by the FRRR SRC Assessment Committee.
- FRRR also set up a special bushfire stream of its Back to School voucher program. It attracted nearly \$1M, and the first funds were awarded in May 2020.

FRRR has also leveraged its unique tax status to be able to partner with corporations or other foundations wishing to direct support to a particular area or wanting to be able to be more involved in the program. FRRR is currently hosting two dedicated bushfire recovery sub-funds and helping to administer grant programs – one national, and one specific to a particular region. In total, these funds are offering around \$2M in support. More than \$700,000 has already been approved for dissemination.

FRRR also applies this model to support local organisations wanting to focus on their community's recovery and raise funds through Not-for-Profit Fundraising Accounts. These groups can partner with FRRR and leverage its unique tax status and attract philanthropic funding. There is currently one fund actively receiving donations which is dedicated to bushfire recovery.

In early January FRRR identified that we had more than 200 active grants in fire-affected areas (grants that had been awarded during the prior 12 months but were not yet acquitted). We recognised that many of these community organisations would not be able to deliver on their projects. Once the immediate threat of fires had passed, FRRR contacted all of our community groups with active grants to reassure them that they could focus on recovery and that FRRR would work with them, when the time was right, to repurpose the grants if needed, in order to best support their community. We also applied an automatic six month extension of the reporting timeframes.

**(h) an examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government's response to those impacts; and**

Having supported rural, regional and remote communities through their recovery from various natural disasters since 2006, FRRR knows that the recent bushfires will have a significant long-term impact on physical and mental-health throughout communities. In addition to the trauma during and immediately subsequent to the event, FRRR has observed that anniversaries and future disaster events often act as triggers.

Different cohorts will be affected in different ways. We commend the federal government's quick action to provide additional funding for counselling in schools, and for Beyond Blue and other agencies to support those directly affected.

In our experience, the more localised the available support is, the better. We strongly encourage additional support to be made available for established local services – so they can be there before, during and long after disasters. The local services are often localised and have smaller resource bases, consequently they often miss out on the funding that larger agencies obtain, however FRRR would encourage governments to continue to look for opportunities to fund a wide variety of organisations to ensure each community can be adequately supported by an existing organisation who is in, and of, their community – rather than a provider who may only provide support for a short period of time following the disaster. An example of a successful model is the Youth Mental Health clinic in Mallacoota, which FRRR has supported, but which is now in urgent need of additional funding to meet demand following the events of the Summer.

FRRR's grant applications tell us that not all people will seek access to clinical level support, but rather are seeking resources on how to look after themselves, or their communities in differing ways. In the immediate aftermath of the 2009 fires, especially in the months following, people needed to come together simply to share what they had experienced and talk through it, to process it.

Over time, needs will evolve and support needs to be there to adapt and respond to those needs. FRRR has previously funded initiatives such as mindfulness sessions, delivered via the Men's Shed (reaching a traditionally hard-to-reach cohort); employing a counsellor, based out of the Neighbourhood Centre in Kinglake; and various school-based mental-health programs, such as a mental health first aid training and employing a school-based counsellor.

Mental health support also needs to come in a range of shapes, sizes and forms to meet differing types and levels of need in communities. Taking a lateral approach to funding initiatives is critical, as people are often reluctant to be seen to seek help, especially in small rural communities. Creating opportunities for people to come together at events or expos, to hear speakers share their experiences or to engage, for example, in arts or exercise programs, act as a way of expressing themselves and processing issues.

There is also a direct link between physical health and mental health outcomes. A rigorously evaluated exercise program in Toolangi, which started out as more of a subtle approach to providing informal mental health support for a cohort of primarily older people has had significant quantifiable physical health benefits. Similarly, FRRR funded an outdoor exercise station in Alexandra, following the 2009 fires, and we have recently funded a similar facility in Tumut. Like all of FRRR's grants, these initiatives are things that the local community prioritise as being important to their recovery.

Finally, it is critical to address both physical and mental health, as individual wellbeing is directly linked to the overarching ability to recover, to earn income and regain a sense of control of one's destiny. Cumulatively, community health affects economic recovery too.

#### **(i) any related matters.**

An emerging issue that we are seeing relates to insurance, which appears to have been largely absent from discussions and policy measures. In particular, we are hearing examples where insurance is either not coming through for things like fencing, or farmers simply can't afford the materials. Fencing is fundamental to agricultural production recommencing, but also has direct implications for community road safety.

At a policy setting level, insurance generally requires that things are built back the way that they were. In some cases, buildings – or even fencing – is more than 100 years old. We would like to see a lens of 'betterment' applied, and if there are barriers, such as insurance settings, that should be reviewed.

#### **Economic Recovery**

There needs to be a joined up and dedicated policy approach to supporting economic recovery in rural, regional and remote areas. Even 10 years on, the economy in areas affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires, such as Marysville, continue to struggle.

Small businesses in rural, regional and remote communities have been particularly badly affected by the 2019-20 bushfires. Tourism, including hospitality, has been especially hard hit, and agricultural production has also been affected. For many of the affected communities, the fires came on top of years of drought, which already had communities under economic and social strain. Now, those communities who saw Easter as their 'light in the tunnel', in terms of the economic recovery, have been hard-hit by COVID-19.

Social and economic recovery need to go hand in hand – they have many of the same drivers. With the effects of COVID-19 likely to be long lasting, we would like to see increased support for more dynamic structures and business models. This could include additional stimulus from government to support online and virtual businesses, and to encourage innovation. For example, FRRR has recently funded Pointer Remote to run a series of workshops in the Snowy Valleys communities to help connect people to work outside their community, or create opportunities that aren't necessarily reliant on physical infrastructure.

#### **Reliable power infrastructure**

Another aspect that has affected the wellbeing and safety of people during the disaster and which is impeding recovery is access to reliable, off-grid, power infrastructure. We have heard of some communities being without power for weeks following the recent bushfires. We believe there is an opportunity to explore distributed power networks at a local and regional level. Further, to ensure that recovery centres can continue to operate even if there is a major power failure – which so often accompanies fire or flood emergencies – we believe there should be a proactive program of provisioning known evacuation centres with solar or alternative power.