Overcoming systemic vulnerability through the *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework*

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Australia is facing disasters, which are increasing in both their frequency and intensity. Driven by a changing climate, these disasters require a coordinated, collaborative and national response to reduce impact and severity.

The Australian Government, through Emergency Management Australia, is leading the charge through the implementation of the *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework*. We are encouraging all sectors of society and government to engage in re-evaluating our vulnerabilities and embedding resilience.

Australia's 'Black Summer' of 2019–20 has been a catalyst for reflection and revision. A realisation has occurred in terms of just how fragile lifestyles can be in the face of Mother Nature's wrath.

This summer has also reaffirmed the world-class professionalism of our emergency services and first responders. The best way for governments to honour their work is to reduce the risks they face. This means systematically and proactively reducing disaster risk; integrating resilience and building back better to a stronger and more resilient standard.

We have limited control over when natural hazards happen. We have far more control over how they impact on the nation. The *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework* provides the foundation for a coordinated national response. Emergency Management Australia leads a comprehensive program to protect communities from the effects of natural hazards in partnership with states and territories and the private sector. However, engagement from all sectors of society is required to deliver systemic and real change. Implementing the framework requires a collaborative effort.

A key aspect of this work is the examination of vulnerability to disasters. It is important to remember that natural hazards only become disasters when our capacity to respond at the local, state or national level is overwhelmed. Changes in the climate, increasing population and changes in population density are compounding this vulnerability exposing more people to potential disasters. Consequently, buy-in and engagement from all levels of government and all sectors of society is required.

The effects of disasters are complex due to the increasingly interconnected world. The integrated nature of infrastructure and supply chains means that flow-on affects are often felt further from the disaster site. However, while integration creates increased risk, it can also bring opportunities and pathways to mitigate, adapt and embed redundancies to reduce the severity of disaster events.

The financial strains disasters place on the economy are another reason for disaster risk reduction. In 2017, Deloitte Access Economics estimated that disasters cost the Australian economy approximately $18 billion per year over the last decade. This is predicted to increase to $39 billion a year by 2050 if current development patterns and population growth remains unchanged.

On top of the immediate consequences of disasters, challenges can be far reaching into the future. Disasters can trigger long-term issues in terms of reduced education and workforce participation, adverse effects on mental health and wellbeing and increased crime rates.

It is tempting to dismiss catastrophic events in risk assessments due to their low likelihood. However, the unprecedented nature of Black Summer illustrates that collaborative effort is needed

to improve resilience and reduce vulnerability through our policies, programs, systems and services to prevent hazards from becoming disasters.

Efforts to reduce disaster risk have gained political momentum since the *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework* was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in March 2020. Through Emergency Management Australia, and in collaboration with state and territory governments, local governments and representatives from the private sector, a National Action Plan is being developed to deliver outcomes to communities.

The *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework* and the National Action Plan reflect the need for action across sectors and acknowledge the importance of national leadership and coordination. Through Emergency Management Australia, the Australian Government recognises the importance of information coordination and is pursuing projects to bolster data and intelligence capabilities across the nation.

Early 2019 saw a pilot project begin; the goal of which was to inform the development of improved information and service capabilities. This will be completed during 2020. The focus of the pilot is on the resilience and vulnerability of the freight and supply chain sector and was undertaken in partnership with other sectors of government. These included the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications; the CSIRO; the Bureau of Meteorology; Geoscience Australia; the Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads; the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre and the University of Adelaide.

Experience with this pilot will inform further work to improve national natural hazard and disaster risk data, intelligence and the development of new information and services products, including for bushfires. Ultimately, the government is committed to establishing an Australian climate and disaster risk information and services capability that decision-makers across sectors need. Improving availability, access and use of information is a key priority of the framework to provide tools to all sectors for disaster risk reduction decision-making.

The experiences of the Black Summer illustrate the need for government to examine the role it plays in both immediate disaster response and long-term recovery. The Prime Minister has commissioned two major inquiries so that we may learn from these tragedies.

The Royal Commission on National Natural Disaster Arrangements began in February and will report its findings by 31 August 2020. The Commission is examining coordination, preparedness for, response to and recovery from disasters as well as improving resilience and adapting to changing climatic conditions mitigating the effects of natural disasters. The CSIRO Report into Climate and Disaster Resilience with implementable recommendations on building Australia's climate and disaster resilience in the immediate and long-term was delivered in June 2020. Recommendations from these reports will inform future national action plans and form part of the central focus for the resilience agenda.

We continue to see positive trends in the private sector. Credit ratings are starting to factor in climate-related risks, parametric insurance products are increasing, and several banks are running analyses on mortgages based on location and regulatory authorities are encouraging company directors to address climate-related risks alongside all other financial risks.

One of the fundamental objectives of the *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework* is the least tangible: changing the mind-sets of Australians and their approaches to Natural Disasters. We need to consider how to embed resilience into planning, policies, systems and services. We need to ensure a cultural change when it comes to disaster resilience, resulting in a conscious shift in the private, public and policy focus. This requires a serious reflection on our values. Decision-makers at all levels of government, the public and private sector and non-government organisations must consider how an increase in the frequency and severity of hazards will impact on their organisations. Those recovering from recent disasters must replace what was lost and build back better. Higher and more resilient standards must be achieved. I am confident that people will step up to this challenge, recognise what needs to be done and fulfil the role they must play to reduce disaster risk.

The Black Summer bushfires have reaffirmed that implementing the *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework* is a palpable priority for Australia. On a massive scale, the fire season revealed the extent of our vulnerability. The task ahead is not an easy one, but it provides an opportunity for widespread resilience building on a whole-of-nation level. We must work to include all sectors of society into this common goal. Our efforts to reverse vulnerability must be united, collaborative and all-encompassing. Throughout the crises of the Black Summer, people displayed incredible courage, generosity and personal strength. This energy is providing focus on reducing vulnerability. In doing so, we can save the households, livelihoods and lives not only in the present, but also for generations into the future.

In short, Australia cannot afford to be reactive to disasters. We must be proactive, considered and direct. Disasters are changing. And so should we.