

Increasing disaster resilience for continued wellbeing and prosperity

The Hon Shane L Stone AC QC

National Recovery and Resilience Agency



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There is no denying Australia's incredible natural beauty. As Dorothea McKellar wrote, it is also a country of 'droughts and flooding rains'.¹ Add to this severe storms, fires and cyclones; plus the fact that science tells us that longer, hotter summers and more extreme weather are here to stay, and you begin to understand the challenges we face.

These natural hazards become disasters when they exceed a community's capacity to cope, leading to widespread impacts on communities and losses. Since floods in north Queensland in 2019, 137 disasters have been declared in 398 local government areas with a total population affected of around 20.8 million.

In 2014, the Productivity Commission estimated that Australia was spending 97% of its disaster funding on mopping up and just 3% on getting ready.² While there has been some improvement since that time, there is still a long way to go. Compounding this problem is the growing economic costs of disasters. Deloitte Access Economics has estimated that this will increase to between \$73 billion and \$94 billion a year by 2060.³

More effort needs to be focused on 'getting ready'. As disaster risk grows, we need to increase our disaster resilience and reduce our exposure and vulnerability. This is essential to reduce the economic costs of natural disasters. This is critical to our continued wellbeing and prosperity.

In the summer of 2019–20, multiple fires burning across Australia heralded the beginning of the devastating bushfire season. There was significant community loss, devastation of wildlife and adverse health effects across 5 states and the Australian Capital Territory. We have survived fires before, but this event was part of the extraordinary 2019–20 high-risk weather season that also saw heatwaves, hailstorms and flooding; all on the back of the crippling drought. In many areas, the combination and successive nature of these events compounded their effect and strained existing systems and capacities. Then came the pandemic!

These events have caused us to reflect, and now act, across the full cycle of preparedness, response, recovery and building community resilience.

Informed by the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, the Australian Government embarked on a coordinated and cohesive approach to emergency management. A key pillar of this response was establishing the National Recovery and Resilience Agency with a single focus on recovery and resilience, and a champion of long-term risk reduction of communities, right across Australia.

The National Recovery and Resilience Agency is responsible for around \$20 billion in programs that support disaster recovery and resilience. It provides national leadership and strategic coordination in disaster recovery, resilience and risk reduction. It does this across all levels of government and within many sectors including infrastructure, emergency management, agriculture, community development, energy and the environment.

The agency works on issues of recovery and resilience capability; best-practice resilience; data, knowledge and information; mental health and wellbeing; finance counselling; pandemic assistance and community outreach. This drives systematic change to reduce disaster risks and build a disaster-resilient Australia. The agency has a real impact on the lives of people in Australia, particularly those directly experiencing disasters.

For example, the agency has responsibility for the jointly funded Commonwealth-state/territory Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, the Disaster Recovery Payment and the Disaster Recovery Allowance. These programs are the primary financial mechanisms for providing relief and recovery assistance to disaster-affected communities. It also supports Emergency Management Australia, which leads national disaster response during the immediate relief phase after major disaster events.

The agency is designing, managing and delivering programs to drive disaster risk reduction and support recovery. The investment is significant and a number of funding programs were recently open for applications. The \$600 million Preparing Australia Program is aimed at reducing the effects of future disasters like floods, bushfires and tropical cyclones. The first \$150 million was allocated to support community infrastructure like flood levees and community refuges as well as awareness, capacity building and planning activities that help communities reduce future disaster risks.

The agency supported \$100 million for the National Flood Mitigation Infrastructure Program, through the Emergency Response Fund, to improve or construct essential public infrastructure to withstand severe flood events.

A further \$50 million from the Emergency Response Fund is allocated for a new Coastal and Estuarine Risk Management Program. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements highlighted the need to mitigate risks to low-lying coastal communities due to predicted sea-level rises and more regular and intense storms. The program targets projects such as ‘grey infrastructure’ like seawalls, groynes, storm surge and tidal barrages in estuaries as well as nature-based solutions such as protecting coastal wetland ecosystems to reduce the risk of inundation and shoreline erosion.

Through these programs, the National Recovery and Resilience Agency is reducing the risk and consequences of natural hazards on communities and works towards outcomes of the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework. Released in April 2019, the framework sets out the foundational work required nationally, across all sectors, to reduce existing disaster risk, minimise new disaster risk and deliver better climate and disaster risk information.

The framework is implemented through a National Action Plan, with the first one released in May 2020. It identified initiatives that are consistent with the framework to reduce disaster risk in Australia. The second National Action Plan is underway, and I look forward to working with the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience and many interested stakeholders on its development. It will be strategic, with a great emphasis on promoting disaster resilience investment.

Through its national network of Recovery Support Officers, the National Recovery and Resilience Agency is working side-by-side with communities that often best understand the local risks faced and their recovery needs. The agency helps them better prepare for, minimise the effects of, and recover more quickly from natural hazards. These Recovery Support Officers live in regional areas and support communities and provide a first-hand understanding of local needs, not just for current events but for all future natural hazards. This locally led approach is a guiding philosophy of the agency in both its design as well as in its implementation. We bring the lessons learnt from supporting communities across the country, we draw on the expertise of the Australian Climate Service, we make evidence-based decisions on where to focus efforts to reduce the effects of future natural disasters and we ask people ‘What do you think is needed?’.

The agency also works collaboratively with state, territory and local government representatives in various ways, including through the Australia New Zealand Emergency Management Committee subcommittees to develop national frameworks and evidence-based best practices to improve community outcomes before, during and after disasters. All this capability delivers an efficient and effective locally generated recovery after disasters, with the goal of increased community resilience ahead of future natural hazards and severe weather events.

The National Recovery and Resilience Agency is not just focusing on local issues. There is much to be learnt from international best practice and experience. We collaborate with international partners to build capacity, knowledge and partnerships and to enhance Australia’s standing in the international community. We support international efforts to drive and coordinate implementation of the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030* and are supporting the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Brisbane from 19–22 September 2022.

Australia is a nation of resilient, innovative and adaptive people, with a strong community spirit that supports those in need. But when natural hazards and emergencies strike, they can cost billions of dollars with catastrophic losses. The 2019–20 high-risk weather season was a wake-up call for bold, unified action. It was time to build on what worked well and to do things differently where changes were needed; and that is what the National Recovery and Resilience Agency is doing.

The agency is taking public sector disaster management capabilities to the next level by bringing together collective learnings and experiences to deliver efficiencies to the way we respond in the future. We are committed to ensuring people affected by disasters and emergencies get the support and advice they need to recover, while also delivering initiatives that reduce the risk and lessen the severity of future challenges.

We continue to face bushfires, floods, cyclones and drought, often at the same time or in quick succession. The continuing COVID-19 pandemic has made these events all the more challenging. Through the National Recovery and Resilience Agency, Australia is better positioned to address the causes of disaster risk, rather than dealing with the symptoms. This will ensure communities can endure more frequent and intense natural hazards, but also thrive and prosper in the aftermath.

To find out about the National Recovery and Resilience, visit www.recovery.gov.au.

Endnotes

1. Dorothea McKellar 1904, *My country*. At: www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/dorothea-mackellars-my-country.
2. Productivity Commission Inquiry Report: Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements. December 2014. At: www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/disaster-funding/report.
3. Special Report: Update to the economic costs of natural disasters in Australia. October 2021. At: <http://australianbusinessroundtable.com.au/our-research>.