



## **Australian Government**

Australian Government response to the  
Senate Select Committee on Disaster Resilience reports:

Boots on the Ground: Raising Resilience; and  
Interim Report

DECEMBER 2024

## Introduction

On 14 September 2023, the Senate Select Committee on Disaster Resilience (the Committee) tabled its *Interim Report*. On 8 August 2024, the Committee tabled its final report *Boots on the Ground: Raising resilience*.

The Committee was established by resolution of the Senate on 30 November 2022 to inquire into Australia's preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, as well as to consider alternative models for disaster response and recovery to the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

Increasingly, the community looks to the Australian Government for national leadership and action during severe weather events. All parts of our national system need to be enhanced to make sure we are ready to respond in times of crisis, and recover quickly. We need to consider holistic reforms that could have a meaningful, lasting impact on Australia's communities and the natural disaster landscape. The Australian Government will continue to work collaboratively with state and territory governments, who have primary responsibility during disasters, to ensure Australians can have confidence in the nation's disaster response capabilities.

The 2023 Defence Strategic Review recommended and the 2024 National Defence Strategy recognised the need for the Commonwealth to work with states and territories to develop alternative capabilities for crisis response and recovery so that the ADF is only used as a force of last resort.

The Committee's reports are a welcome contribution to the discussion on national resilience. The Committee's recommendations are being deliberated alongside a range of work underway across the Commonwealth, including consideration of the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding, led by Mr Andrew Colvin AO APM and the Independent Review of National Natural Disaster Governance Arrangements, led by Dr Robert Glasser, which were released to the public on 25 October 2024. Like the Committee's report, the recommendations from the Colvin and Glasser reviews support a strategic shift towards disaster risk reduction and resilience to reduce the impact of disasters on the Australian people.

At the same time as the Committee was undertaking this review, the Department of Home Affairs consulted a range of stakeholders to understand what Commonwealth capabilities are needed to help support the states and territories to respond to nationally significant crises when their capacity is, or will be, exceeded. A particular focus was identifying the capabilities the ADF deploys to assist the nation to respond to disasters and how alternatives can be established as a whole-of-nation enterprise. Consultations identified that Commonwealth support is best targeted at alleviating emergency workforce pressures and capability shortages, and improved national coordination of effort.

Historically, the ADF has been the Commonwealth's primary non-financial means to support domestic disaster response and relief efforts, including supplying personnel and equipment during crises. While the ADF will continue to play a role in responding to exceptional, catastrophic disasters, the Australian Government appreciates the Committee recognising the ADF should only be used as a force of last resort for domestic aid to the community during and following disasters.

The most common theme arising from public consultations, and that has also been identified by the Committee, and the Colvin and Glasser Reviews, is the need to change the way we, as a nation, think about, prepare for and respond to crises. The importance of working alongside First Nations communities in developing resilience capabilities was also identified through consultation.

Since 2022, the Australian Government has been focused on bolstering national resilience to a range of hazards and threats and has made significant investments in the nation's ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. The Government has provided:

- an additional \$35 million over two years from 2024-25 for the National Aerial Firefighting Fleet, which provides highly specialised aircraft for disaster response by states and territories through the National Aerial Firefighting Centre.
- an initial \$18.6 million and an additional \$26.8 million over three years from 2024-25 for the National Emergency Management Stockpile to provide readily deployable assets like emergency shelters, electricity generators, water filtration and sandbags to states and territories to assist in their disaster response.
  - The Stockpile was used for the first time in Far North Queensland following ex-Tropical Cyclone Jasper to provide temporary accommodation for those helping to clean up and rebuild. The Stockpile is intended to become a 'first resort' Commonwealth alternative for capabilities that had previously been requested of the ADF.
- \$38.3 million over four years from 2022-23 for Disaster Relief Australia (DRA) to expand its capacity to deliver disaster relief and recovery activities.
  - DRA has provided vital support following crises, including in response to Tropical Cyclone Jasper. During this response, DRA provided personnel and equipment to undertake damage and impact assessments, route clearance, property access measures and debris removal.
- an additional \$170.9 million for Financial Wellbeing and Capability programs, including Emergency Relief, Food Relief, Financial Counselling and other supports like pre-crisis and early intervention programs. This funding has been allocated in response to cost of living pressures and natural disasters.

In Budget 2023-24, the Government provided \$28 million over two years to deliver the National Climate Adaptation and Risk Program. This includes a National Climate Risk Assessment, to improve understanding of nationally significant climate risks both now and

into the future, and a National Adaptation Plan, which will set a comprehensive framework to better prepare for and manage these risks.

Our climate is changing and it is highly likely that existing state and territory response capacities will be exceeded at times. Australians can have confidence that the Australian Government is looking for opportunities to better protect our communities from more complex, frequent and catastrophic disasters while reducing our reliance on the ADF to assist.

## **Interim Report Recommendations**

**Interim Report Recommendation 1: The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience recommends that the House of Representatives Economics Committee examine insurance companies' handling of flood payouts.**

Response:

The Australian Government **agrees in principle** to this recommendation.

Following a reference from the House of Representatives on 7 August 2023, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics commenced an inquiry into insurers' responses to 2022 major floods claims. The House Standing Committee released its report on 18 October 2024.

**Interim Report Recommendation 2: The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience recommends that a parliamentary inquiry be established into land planning with respect to natural disaster resilience.**

Response:

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation. This recommendation would be subject to a decision by either of the houses of the Australian Parliament.

The Planning Ministers' Meeting (PMM) gathers state and territory planning ministers with the Commonwealth to consider joint approaches to common planning issues. On 7 December 2022, National Cabinet tasked the PMM with developing a national standard for considering disaster and climate risk, as part of land use planning and building reform processes.

Planning Ministers agreed to the NSW Government leading the development of a framework and guidance on nationally agreed principles for natural disaster and climate risk considerations in land use planning decisions. New South Wales will consult all jurisdictions on this work and prepare a report and timeline for implementation into land use planning by all jurisdictions.

**Interim Report Recommendation 3: The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience recommends that, in light of the current Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding (Colvin Review), the Review considers evidence provided to the Select Committee around the need to use funds to build back better and standardise a regime across the States and Territories.**

Response:

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

Mr Andrew Colvin AO APM, conducted the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding (Colvin Review). Mr Colvin considered several submissions to the Senate Select Committee as part of its evidence base to inform the findings and recommendations of the Review. The final report was delivered to the Minister for Emergency Management on 30 April 2024 and released to the public on 25 October 2024. The report and its recommendations are being considered by the Government.

The Australian Government already works with states and territories on opportunities to use existing funding mechanisms such as the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) to build back better. In response to disasters in recent years, the Australian Government also provided significant financial support to states and territories to enhance the future resilience of highly vulnerable disaster affected housing and public assets.

**Interim Report Recommendation 4: The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience recommends that the Independent Review of National Natural Disaster Governance Arrangements (Glasser Review) look at the current COMDISPLAN and the triaging of emergencies in light of its impact on the Australian Defence Force.**

Response:

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

A review of COMDISPLAN was not included in the Terms of Reference for the Independent Review of National Natural Disaster Governance Arrangements, led by climate change and disaster management expert, Dr Robert Glasser. However, Dr Glasser consulted with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) regarding COMDISPLAN and it has been a consideration in the analysis and findings of his review. Dr Glasser provided his report to government in December 2023.

On 25 October 2024, the National Emergency Management Ministers' Meeting released the final report of the Glasser Review to the public. The report and its recommendations are being considered by Government.

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements report also included a recommendation that the Australian Government should revise the COMDISPLAN thresholds to provide that a request for Australian Government assistance, including Defence assistance, is able to be made by a state or territory government when:

- (1) it has exhausted, or is ‘likely to exhaust’, all government, community and commercial resources
- (2) it cannot mobilise its own resources (or community and commercial resources) in time, or
- (3) the Australian Government has a capability that the state or territory does not have.

The Royal Commission’s recommendation was completed when COMDISPLAN was updated in 2020–21.

The review of the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework (AGCMF) in 2023 recommended that the Australian Government’s national plans – including COMDISPLAN – be regularly re-evaluated and updated. NEMA is scheduled to review COMDISPLAN through 2024, and into 2025. As part of this review, NEMA will assess whether COMDISPLAN’s arrangements remain fit-for-purpose to position the Australian Government to provide non-financial assistance to states and territories during crises.

The Australian Government notes that COMDISPLAN is a mechanism through which the Australian Government provides and triages non-financial assistance to states and territories during times of crisis. However, COMDISPLAN does not provide a framework for triaging emergencies, which are the responsibilities of the states and territories.

## Final Report Recommendations

**Recommendation 1: The committee recommends that the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) and relevant guidelines be amended to enable funds to be distributed for the purpose of building betterment into recovery and reconstruction, ensuring that this funding is available to all jurisdictions.**

Response:

The Australian Government **agrees in principle** to this recommendation.

States and territories have primary responsibility for disaster management and resilience within their jurisdictions. The Australian Government is committed to supporting jurisdictions to build back essential public assets to a more resilient condition. Under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), the Government is already able to fund certain betterment activities, with the Government previously cost-sharing a number of betterment programs with Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. These programs are intended to support rebuilding and recovery, with a resilience component, with the goal to mitigate risk against future disaster events and their costs.

The 2024-25 Higher-Risk Weather Season Recovery Support Package, which was recently announced by Senator the Hon Jenny McAllister, Minister for Emergency Management, alongside the release of the Colvin and Glasser Reviews, includes national advice for state, territory and local government practitioners on how the DRFA can be used to deliver resilient infrastructure. This includes by allowing for:

- the application of modern building, design and construction standards;
- the use of contemporary (rather than obsolete or outdated) construction methodologies and building materials;
- the adoption of a more appropriate type of asset rather than ‘like-for-like’ replacement—e.g. replacing a bridge with a culvert system;
- the relocation of a damaged asset to a more suitable site; and/or
- the use of complementary funding from other Commonwealth or state/territory programs.

The Commonwealth is committed to consulting with states and territories and with other key stakeholders to develop a response to the reviews for consideration in 2025.



**Recommendation 2: The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a national asset register to improve the efficiency of the deployment of resources in the aftermath of a disaster. The Government should consider whether it is feasible to include not only federal and state government assets, but also suitable local community, private sector and non-government organisation assets.**

Response:

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

The 2023 consultations noted the Commonwealth would be well placed to improve coordination of national resources and assets. Enhanced coordination of national resources would optimise the use of emergency response and recovery capability and capacity. This may reduce the need for the ADF be called out to support states and territories during nationally significant crises.

In 2023, the Australian Government established the National Emergency Management Stockpile (NEMS) capability. The NEMS capability contains two service lines traditionally provided by the ADF, namely, a physical stockpile of emergency goods and a virtual stockpile of emergency goods and services accessed through a standing offer panel.

NEMA is currently operationalising the capability model outlined within the Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework, to map the strategic role of the Australian Government in supporting capability development and deployment in response to severe to catastrophic disasters. This project is not designed to supplement state and territory capabilities but designed to support states and territories once the relevant threshold is reached.

The National Resource Sharing Centre (NRSC), funded through NEMA over two years at the 2022 – 23 Budget, enhances the disaster response coordination and facilitation of shared resources between jurisdictions. The remit of the centre is to coordinate and facilitate international and interstate deployments through established partnerships and national arrangements in collaboration with NEMA.

**Recommendation 3: The committee recommends that the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements be amended to set aside a proportion of funding to be offered to local governments up-front to help facilitate disaster recovery and resilience to ensure councils do not always have to bear the burden of financing repairs up-front.**

Response:

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

States and territories have primary responsibility for emergency management within their jurisdictions, and local governments, the not-for-profit sector and industry also play a critical role.

In 2022-23, the Australian Government provided almost \$1.8 billion in Disaster Resilience Funding Arrangements (DRFA) advance payments to several states. These payments were provided with the specific request it was to be used to support local governments to fund recovery work, including reconstruction and priority recovery initiatives following several recent disasters.

The Commonwealth is committed to consult with states and territories and key stakeholders on the Colvin and Glasser reviews which will include consideration of Commonwealth funding mechanisms such as the DRFA, and support to local governments undertaking recovery efforts.

**Recommendation 4: The committee recommends that the Australian Government consider amendments to the *Fair Work Act 2009* to legislate time off for volunteers working with registered organisations and for volunteers to be granted leave from employment, similar to the provisions provided to Reservists under the *Defence Reserve Service (Protection) Act 2001*.**

Response:

The Australian Government **notes** the recommendation.

The Australian Government values the critical contribution volunteers make to emergency management, and the important role workplaces play in supporting this. Enabling volunteers to take time off work during disasters supports volunteers to be deployed on longer term response and recovery efforts. This helps unlock a substantial latent workforce that may not otherwise be able to be called upon, increasing the capacity of the national emergency management workforce.

All national system employees – that is, employees covered by the Fair Work Act 2009 rather than state based legislation – are entitled to community service leave under section 108 of the National Employment Standards. This entitlement allows an employee to be absent from their

employment for the time they are engaged in an emergency management activity with a registered body, reasonable travelling time associated with the activity and reasonable rest time immediately following the activity. There is no set limit to the amount of community service leave an employee is entitled to.

With respect to the Committee's reference to the leave arrangements for Defence Reservists, the Government notes there is no legal obligation for employers to pay employees while they are absent on Defence service, including training. For both Defence Reservists and voluntary emergency management activity, some employers can and do provide paid leave under their relevant industrial instrument. An award, agreement or contract may supplement the National Employment Standards by providing an entitlement that is more favourable for employees, such as paid community service leave or paid Defence Reservist leave.

State or territory laws that provide for emergency services duties operate concurrently with the Fair Work Act (section 27). Where a state or territory law provides entitlements that are more beneficial than the National Employment Standards in relation to engaging in eligible community service activities, the state or territory law would apply.

**Recommendation 5: In circumstances where the cost of relevant training is not covered by the organisation, the committee recommends that the Australian Government consider amendments to legislation, policy and guidelines to allow volunteers working in organisations such as State Emergency and Rural Bushfire Services to claim tax deductions for training and courses that are a part of their emergency volunteering.**

Response:

The Australian Government **does not agree** to this recommendation.

The Australian Government values the critical contribution volunteers make to emergency management, providing a vital service to the community without the expectation of financial recompense.

However, the tax system is not well placed to provide support in this area. It would be inconsistent with the general principle under Australia's taxation law that a tax deduction is allowed for, and generally limited to, expenses incurred in earning assessable income. Further, any support would not be timely and provide little or no benefit if the volunteer has low or no taxable income.

**Recommendation 6: The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a national disaster mental health hub to coordinate and provide mental health resources, training, and support for first responders and communities affected by disasters across the nation. This hub should serve as a comprehensive resource centre for addressing the mental health needs of all stakeholders involved in disaster response and recovery efforts.**

Response:

The Australian Government **agrees in principle** to this recommendation.

The Australian Government will consider this recommendation in the process implementing the *National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework*. The Framework was launched by the Australian Government on 21 June 2023 and provides guidance, reference material and aims to support consistency in delivery of mental health and wellbeing services in the context of national disasters.

The Australian Government currently funds several initiatives to enhance access to information and to provide mental health support to emergency service workers and communities. The Australian Government has funded the Black Dog Institute to establish the National Emergency Workers Support Service (NEWSS), which provides trauma-informed resources and support for emergency service workers and volunteers, active and retired, aged 18 years and over.

The Australian Government also previously funded Phoenix Australia to establish the Disaster Mental Health Hub that provides information, resources and training programs to assist responders and communities in a disaster.

**Recommendation 7: The committee recommends that the Australian Government design and implement consistent national trauma-informed care principles, ensuring that first responders—both professional and volunteer—receive training and support in these national principles to better address the mental health and well-being of disaster-affected individuals and communities.**

Response:

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

States and territories have primary responsibility for emergency services workers - professional and volunteers - within their jurisdiction, and for mental health policy and the design and delivery of mental health services. The Australian Government provides national leadership and strategic coordination, including through development of the *National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework* and the *National Mental Health Plan for Emergency Services Workers 2024-2027* (the Plan).

The Framework has eight guiding principles specific to mental health service provision, aligned to the *National Principles for Disaster Recovery*. These principles are designed to drive all action to implement the Framework and the Plan.

The Australian Government funds national programs to supplement mental health supports for emergency services workers provided by states and territories. As an example, the Disaster Response Network (DRN), implemented by Australian Psychological Society, plays a crucial role in providing specialised training to a network of volunteer psychologists to expand psychosocial support for emergency services workers, to enhance their preparedness to support those affected by disasters.

**Recommendation 8: The committee recommends that the Australian Government convene a disaster resilience mental health summit to hear from all related agencies and stakeholders to identify solutions to the mental health impacts of disaster.**

Response:

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Australian Government will work with relevant agencies and stakeholders to consider this recommendation as part of broader national efforts to implement the *National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework* and the *National Mental Health Plan for Emergency Services Workers 2024-2027*.

**Recommendation 9: The committee recommends that the Australian Government consider how it can further support Disaster Relief Australia, and other similar organisations, not only with funding beyond 2026, but also how the Australian Government can further incorporate Disaster Relief Australia into its national disaster response arrangements and boost its numbers through partnerships with the Australian Defence Force and the Department of Veterans' Affairs.**

Response:

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Government committed \$38.3 million over four years in 2022–23 to increase the operational capacity of Disaster Relief Australia (DRA) by 5,200 additional volunteers, many of whom are ex-ADF personnel who are transitioning to civilian life. Through this funding, DRA is taking steps to diversify financial resources and support program growth, positioning them towards its goal of organisational sustainability. The ADF and Department of Veterans' Affairs supports partnering with volunteer organisations in its transition programs and

recognises the value of connection with community and continued service through volunteering for many veterans following separation or transfer from the military.

The Australian Government has deployed DRA a number of times since the establishment of the grant arrangement. This includes planning and logistics support as well as impact assessment assistance to support the Northern Territory during and following bushfires in November 2023. This was the first time non-ADF personnel were deployed by the Commonwealth as the primary non-financial lever, supporting recovery efforts. DRA was also deployed to lead recovery efforts after the South East Queensland storms in December 2023, and supporting the recovery of Far North Queensland in January 2024 following ex-Tropical Cyclone Jasper. It provided damage and impact assessments, route clearance, property access measures and debris removal.

**Recommendation 10: The committee recommends that the Australian Government consider ways to incentivise young Australians to participate in volunteer organisations that provide support for disaster response and recovery.**

Response:

The Australian Government **agrees in principle** to this recommendation.

The Australian Government, through the Department of Home Affairs, considered this recommendation during public consultations in late 2023. These consultations confirmed the trend of declining volunteerism and identified the need for a more sustained, capable and resilient workforce to manage a future of more frequent and severe crises. Stakeholders also outlined cost-of-living pressures and their impacts on prospective volunteers, stating these pressure points were contributing to reluctance from younger Australians to actively pursue volunteering opportunities. Young Australians wanted to flexibly engage in volunteering.

The Office for Youth runs Youth Advisory Groups involving young people aged 16 to 25. These Groups work with the Australian Government on the development of policies and programs that matter to young people. The Government engaged with the Civic Engagement Youth Advisory Group on 27 June 2024 to discuss how best to support youth volunteering. This discussion will assist in the consideration of any future options to reduce barriers to youth volunteering and to encourage uptake in the emergency management sector.

The Australian Government, through the Department of Social Services, is also investing in a national advertising campaign to raise awareness of volunteering opportunities for young people. The campaign was launched on 20 October 2024 and will run until 30 June 2025.

The Department of Home Affairs is considering what the most appropriate existing mechanisms could be to encourage and support emergency management volunteerism across the community, including by young people. No decisions have yet been made on the best path forward.

