

## **Submission to the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper**

### **NRM Regions Australia**

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### **Australia's regional NRM model and its capabilities**

NRM Regions Australia is the national peak body for Australia's NRM sector, a network of 54 interlinked regional organisations that provide integrated landscape-scale planning, help channel investment, and work on the ground for resilience and recovery of natural resources across tenures (from private land to conservation areas and from urban to rural to remote environments).

This infrastructure has been in place for over twenty years, with the regional NRM model agreed by COAG in 2000 and extended across the country. Our sector represents a level of standing capability in landscape resilience, including a growing and crucial role in working with communities to recover our natural resources, industries, biodiversity and landscape integrity after disasters.

NRM organisations are key delivery partners for the Commonwealth Government through the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT). They play an important role in linking together a wide range of initiatives and networks at a regional level, and in knitting together investments across a range of Commonwealth, state / territory and industry programs. NRM regions seek to work strategically at the landscape scale, with partners and networks across government, industry, NGOs, First Nations and communities, to strengthen Australia's resilience.

The model now provides robust governance and financial management, standing capability to deliver Australian and state/territory Government priorities, community and industry participation, and a networked, landscape-scale planning approach.

### **NRM organisations' role in disaster recovery**

The statutory role of the NRM sector in emergency management varies by jurisdiction. In several southeastern states and territories, NRM organisations are statutory, and in several cases are directly integrated into emergency management and first response. In other jurisdictions, the NRM sector is non-government, yet frequently play a vital role in emergency response.

Across the board, this crucial role of NRM organisations following disasters includes:

- mobilising community networks to organise, prioritise and undertake recovery of natural resources across tenures
- drawing on embedded regional planning and extensive local data and knowledge to prioritise emergency actions and recovery efforts
- supporting recovery of primary industries
- restoring landscape infrastructure and integrity such as protection and recovery of soils, preventing erosion, recovering streambanks and waterways, replacing damaged fencing

- enabling First Nations recovery of Country and enterprises for landscape management
- recovering waterways, restoring habitat, protection and foraging for wildlife and biodiversity, protecting refuges, and restoring ecosystems and connectivity across landscapes
- managing landscape-scale threats such as invasive species and disease, that can proliferate and damage agriculture and ecosystems post disasters
- strengthening, growing and forging new community networks for long-term resilience and recovery planning
- embedding a growing recognition of the value of nature-led community recovery for long-term psychological wellbeing and community resilience

Just a few examples of the significant work NRM organisations have undertaken following disasters over the past decade include:

- **Marysville bushfires, Victoria (2009):** Goulburn–Broken Catchment Management Authority (CMA) worked with the Arthur Rylah Institute, Parks Victoria and disaster recovery managers across the Victorian Government to rescue threatened fish from damaged streams and rivers following the devastating fires. Community members stepped forward to become involved in the fish rescue, and worked with the CMA to shape restoration of habitat and stream integrity, and eventual return of the fish to the community’s restored waterways, culminating in a community festival. This helped restore community ties and sense of safety and belonging in returning to the devastated township, and supported the long-term recovery of community resilience as well as the fish populations. It has become an exemplar for nature-led community recovery in Victoria, which was picked up as a model in the aftermath of the 2019–20 wildfires.
- **Cyclone Yasi, Queensland (2011):** Terrain NRM worked with Girringun rangers to bring together First Nations communities from across North Queensland to undertake wide-scale disaster recovery efforts across tenures and across the entire community; worked with growers faced with badly damaged and devastated crops (such as bananas) to recover their businesses and plan for a resilient recovery, so their businesses were better placed to withstand future cyclones; and worked with community organisations and private landholders to restore habitat and protect threatened wildlife.
- **Black Summer bushfires, landscape impacts, Kangaroo Island SA (2020):** during the devastating wildfires of 2020, Kangaroo Island Landscape Board (KILB) were called on by the South Australian government emergency managers to share their data and local knowledge to support the emergency response. Following the fires, KILB worked with the community, landholders and environmental NGOs to undertake large-scale feral cat control, replace damaged fencing and protect and recover vital habitat for threatened species.
- **Black Summer bushfires, coastal impacts, south-east NSW (2020):** Following widespread destruction of coastal vegetation from the 2019–2020 bushfires, OceanWatch worked with MangroveWatch, local Landcare groups, oyster growers, and community volunteers to recover mangroves destroyed by the fires. Mangroves are essential habitats and breeding grounds for fisheries, invaluable for preventing coastal erosion, and usually resilient to wildfires; but the scale and intensity of this fire season saw widespread devastation. Through this partnership, OceanWatch has built

the capacity of oyster farmers and volunteers to repair damaged mangrove habitats, built local teams to monitor mangrove health, and trialled assisted mangrove restoration techniques, to ensure fisheries, oyster farms and coastal ecosystems can thrive.

- **Drought resilience, Western Australia (2021):** with a trend towards decreased rainfall and increased intensity of droughts and extreme events, Northern Agricultural Catchments Council worked with West Midlands Group, Liebe Group and Yuna Farm Improvement Group to establish improved land management demonstrations across 773 ha of the Northern Agricultural Region. This included changing the timing of soil amelioration, adjusting crops and pastures, and establishing shelterbelts to retain hydration and prevent wind erosion, growing non-cash crops for feed security and to reduce soil exposure, and demonstrating the use of bio-fertilisers to improve soil function and efficiency in broad-acre agriculture.
- **River Murray floods, South Australia (2022-3):** Wetlands staff from Murray and Riverlands Landscape Board were deployed out of the Incident Management Centre during the recent River Murray flooding event, using their skills to help the SES with modelling, mapping and anticipating unforeseen challenges (such as wind seiche). Following the flooding, the Board surveyed the ecological response to the floods across the region, identified priorities for action and advice for landholders, and used the opportunity of rescues from blackwater events upstream to translocate the Murray Cray back to South Australia. They also partnered with Trees for Life to offer discounted seedlings, stakes and tree guards to support landholders to restore vegetation.

There are also significant, ongoing programs and partnerships with state governments that demonstrate critical roles NRM can organisations play, which could be extended through co-investment across jurisdictions. For example:

- **Agricultural industries emergency response, New South Wales:** Immediately following any emergency or natural disaster, Local Land Services through its 11 regions helps to coordinate the response for primary production when there are potential animal welfare concerns or intensive agricultural production losses. This includes collection and collation of damage to primary production to inform recovery activities and (agricultural) natural disaster declarations; surveillance and movement of livestock during or after the emergency; and provision of emergency animal feed and water, veterinary care, humane destruction and coordinated disposal of animal carcasses.
- **Disaster recovery employment programs, Victoria:** Emergencies create significant disruption in employment and economic activities. Catchment Management Authorities support people whose employment is disrupted by natural disasters – such as flood, drought and bushfires – to take up new employment in essential activities to strengthen and restore natural resources during and after disasters.

The work that the NRM sector invests in builds not just the resilience of landscapes and industries, but also the community networks needed to support community recovery and mobilise for future recovery efforts. However, **these capabilities, skills, expertise and networks require ongoing investment and coordination to hold them together and ensure they can be rapidly mobilised for emergency response and recovery in future.**

## Positioning NRM as part of national disaster recovery capability

The NRM sector represents a ready-made, integrated national infrastructure, which if bolstered will provide a national standing capability for community-based disaster recovery of our landscapes, industries, biodiversity and natural infrastructure. As preferred providers for the Australian Government, the sector is able to be rapidly mobilised and scaled up in response to disasters, to provide integrated recovery for landscapes, industries and ecosystems.

Working with our partners across all sectors and tenures, NRM organisations are frequently the crucial 'glue' that holds together and supports rapid deployment of integrated disaster recovery response for natural resources. By supporting recovery across industries, natural infrastructure, productive land and communities, the work we do plays a vital part in recovering overall economic and community wellbeing and cohesion. And as locally embedded members of the communities impacted by disasters, NRM officers provide a trusted face, local knowledge, and enduring presence, offering communities continuity, capability and reassurance, strengthening resilience and networks between events, and supporting disaster preparedness for communities, industries and natural systems.

The vital capability of regional NRM organisations and their partners in disaster recovery could be considerably strengthened, to become a widely recognised and guaranteed presence in large-scale disaster response and recovery. To achieve this, **our sector will need a step change in the level of investment in our standing capability and surge capacity, supplemented during large-scale emergencies with additional resources to allow for rapid scale-up.**

**In-built surge capacity is important**, as our staff, like many others in regional and rural communities, frequently play multiple roles during emergencies: as firefighters and emergency services volunteers, as landholders, and in their professional capacity. Strengthening our sector's standing capability in disaster recovery through increased Commonwealth investment, and building in surge capacity, can ensure that our sector is able and ready to respond to emergencies of significant scale into the future, with a body of skilled, trained and locally trusted professionals.

This step change investment in NRM standing capability and surge capacity will deliver:

- A national network of experienced, locally embedded experts in disaster recovery of natural resources to support recovery of primary industries and landscape-based infrastructure, ecosystems, heritage areas and wildlife,
- Investment in community integration, networks and nature-led recovery to support devastated communities to regroup, recover wellbeing, and rebuild social capital following disasters.
- Investment in First Nations work to restore Country, economic and social enterprises for landscape resilience and disaster recovery, and in recovery of First Nations community wellbeing through supporting work on healing Country and communities (this should complement direct investment in First Nations caring for Country and disaster recovery capability)

- Long-term support to hold together community and organisational networks for preparedness and rapid response during emergencies.
- Strengthening integration between strategies for recovery of landscapes and resources, and strategies for community and economic recovery.
- National-level leadership and integration to work closely with policy-makers, grow the evidence base for effective recovery, build a knowledge bank and networks to support good practice and ongoing improvement, and help provide information for evaluation and improvement.

This investment would also deliver significant co-benefits through:

- Strengthening community, industry and landscape-level preparedness and resilience *between* extreme events
- Delivering locally-appropriate and adaptable solutions for regional climate adaptation
- Delivering co-benefits for wellbeing of communities, including First Nations and regional communities
- Informing national climate adaptation and disaster resilience strategies and priorities
- Ensuring NRM capability, and the wider networks we help coordinate, remain skilled and ready for deployment

Through the NHT and across myriad government programs, the NRM sector has worked for close to 25 years hand-in-glove with the Australian Government environment and agriculture portfolios. Recognising the situation that lies ahead—of growing exposure to extreme events and significantly increased demand for disaster recovery—there is a significant window now for our sector to come together with the Commonwealth disaster management agencies, to forge an equally close partnership, provide a vital element of Commonwealth disaster recovery response and strengthen Australia’s disaster resilience capabilities.

We look forward to exploring this further and working together to strengthen our capabilities through this review process.