

Victorian Government response
to the Royal Commission into
National Natural Disaster
Arrangements

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

Published March 2021

ISBN 978-1-922262-49-3 (pdf/online/MS word)

Unless indicated otherwise, content in this publication is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/. It is a condition of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Licence that you must give credit to the original author who is the State of Victoria.



We, the Victorian Government, acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and waterways upon which our lives depend. We acknowledge and pay our respects to ancestors of this country, Elders, knowledge holders and leaders – past, present and emerging. We extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Overview of Victoria's position

Australia's unprecedented bushfire season of 2019-20 highlighted the changing scale and intensity of natural disasters and the increasing pressures placed on communities, businesses, the environment and the emergency management sector.

The Victorian Government welcomes the findings of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (the Royal Commission), which it jointly established with the Commonwealth.

Victoria supports the intent of all the recommendations and the desire to continue to strengthen and improve emergency management outcomes, community-led recovery and enhanced disaster resilience for all Australians.

As acknowledged by the Royal Commission, state and territory governments have – and will continue to have – primary responsibility and accountability for emergency management. Victoria looks forward to working with all jurisdictions to improve emergency management outcomes for all Australians.

Victoria remains concerned about reform that may impact state-based coordination arrangements. This includes Recommendation 5.1 (to make provision for a declaration of a state of emergency) which would enable unilateral action by the Commonwealth to declare a national state of emergency. The introduction of new laws that empower the Commonwealth to declare a national emergency, without consultation with states and territories in some circumstances, is concerning. The circumstances in which a declaration may be made and the actions that the Commonwealth can take must be clear and understood, in line with the Royal Commission's recommendations.

Victoria is pleased to see the Royal Commission reinforcing the approach that managing natural disaster risk is built from shared responsibility involving all levels of government, community, individuals and the private sector. Integration and collaboration are at the core of existing Victorian Government arrangements for natural disaster risk management. For example, 'Safer Together – A new approach to reducing the risk of bushfire in Victoria - provides that local communities will be involved in decision making about bushfire risk all year round and that fire agencies will work with communities to determine local solutions to reduce bushfire risk.

Victoria welcomes the Royal Commission's acknowledgement of the impact that climate change is having on driving more severe and intense natural disasters. Victoria is one of the most bushfire prone areas in the world and, as climate change accelerates, the compounding effects of more frequent and intense natural disasters will present greater challenges to our communities, infrastructure, economies and ecosystems.

Victoria is committed to continuing its decisive action on climate change. Immediate and ongoing action to reduce emissions by all Australian governments is the only way to prevent the continuing escalation of natural disasters.

The Victorian Government also recognises Traditional Owners' deep connection with, knowledge of, and rights in respect of the lands and waters of Victoria. We are committed to partnering with Traditional Owners in land management and will work closely with Traditional Owners as we make improvements to the way we manage land and emergencies in Victoria.

Victoria welcomes the Commonwealth Response to the Royal Commission and its commitment to enhance Emergency Management Australia's capability and capacity, and establishing a national resilience, relief and recovery agency and 'Resilience Services' by 1 July 2021. Ensuring that the Commonwealth agencies remain coordinated and provide for streamlined engagement before, during and after emergencies is essential. Any enhancement in Commonwealth capability and capacity needs to recognise and adjust to the different arrangements in each jurisdiction and identify and support downstream resource implications which can often be significant.

Victoria welcomes early action from the Commonwealth on the establishment of appropriate national ministerial and official level governance arrangements. These arrangements should ensure oversight of a prioritised implementation plan, resource and funding implications and consultation with key partners, including communities, business and the not-for-profit sector.

Victoria's leadership in emergency management reform

Victoria has a long history of emergency management reform. The state's emergency management practices have been strengthened and improved through our experience and learnings from significant natural disaster events in recent years. These events include the 2009 bushfires, the 2010-11 floods across parts of Victoria, the 2014 Hazelwood coal mine fire, the 2016 thunderstorm asthma event in Melbourne and the 2019-20 bushfires in the east and north-east of Victoria. This provides a solid foundation upon which to continue to reform and strengthen our arrangements in Victoria and nationally.

Victoria maintains a strong commitment to strengthening our mitigation against, response to and recovery from natural disasters. We are uniquely placed as one of only two states or territories to have a dedicated Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) and we recognise the value of ongoing accountability and assurance mechanisms to support emergency management reform. The Royal Commission acknowledged the valuable work undertaken by IGEM to support public accountability, in addition to their core objectives of encouraging a culture of assurance, accountability, continuous improvement and best practice in emergency management. The findings of the Royal Commission present an opportunity for enhanced national coordination in accountability and assurance.

In supporting cross-border communities, Victoria built capability and capacity ahead of the 2020-21 summer season through dedicated personnel and arrangements. Additionally, in partnership with the Commonwealth, we have committed to strengthening telecommunications resilience in isolated bushfire-prone communities, as well as ensuring that isolated communities and peak holiday destinations are key to the planning of evacuation processes.

Key recommendations and themes directed at the states and territories

Victoria looks forward to building on this reform journey by addressing the recommendations from the Royal Commission. Recommendations directed at the State are broadly consistent with themes arising from the Victorian IGEM's Review of 10 Years of Emergency Management Reform and Phase 1 of IGEM's Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season. These areas of reform and recommendations intersect across all pillars of emergency management and will strengthen resilience across communities, businesses and all levels of government.

1. Capability and capacity

Victoria has a large, committed and highly capable workforce with first-hand experience of Victoria's natural disaster events. We are committed to keeping Victorians safe by ensuring continued focus on emergency management sector capacity and capability. Victoria will work with all jurisdictions to gain greater clarity about how and when states and territories can access Commonwealth resources like the Australian Defence Force; continue to evaluate our aerial firefighting capability; and support local governments' emergency management capacity and capability.

2. Interoperability

Victoria supports the Royal Commission's recommendations relating to cross-jurisdictional interoperability of equipment for fire and emergency services, particularly radio and communications. This was identified as a key area of reform of the IGEM's Inquiry into the

2019-20 Victorian Fire Season, and Victoria is working to improve interoperability through identifying resourcing, training and professional development needs. Victoria has committed to undertaking scenario exercises with cross-border emergency management partners to foster interoperability and stronger relationships between states. Victoria also continues to support the Emergency Management Operational Communications Program.

3. Evacuation planning

Victoria supports the Royal Commission's recommendations regarding evacuation planning and is considering emergency management planning and evacuation through its response to the IGEM Inquiry and associated implementation plan. Following the significant evacuation of Victorians during the 2019-20 bushfires, policies, processes and procedures, such as the Joint Standard Operating Procedure for evacuation operations were updated to make communities safer ahead of the 2020-21 summer season. Victoria is also reviewing emergency management arrangements to ensure evacuation plans are clear and appropriate for different emergency scenarios.

4. Information and warnings

Clear and consistent information and warnings save lives. Developing a standard system across Australia will assist cross-border communities to access accurate information in an emergency. The Royal Commission made several recommendations to ensure consistency of messaging across borders. This included recommendations regarding the Australian Fire Danger Rating System, a national all-hazard warning system and app, and minimum information standards. As a leader in an 'all hazards and all communities' emergency management approach, Victoria supports these recommendations and opportunities to further strengthen the accessibility of current, clear and localised information through the VicEmergency app and VicEmergency website.

5. Education and engagement

Community education and engagement are important elements of disaster preparedness and resilience. Victoria supports the Royal Commission's recommendations regarding disaster education for individuals and communities. We will continue to deliver community education programs and work to ensure national consistency of key messages. Victoria will also ensure that tailored community education campaigns accompany new programs and information streams, such as the Australian Fire Danger Rating System, national all-hazard warning system and changes to evacuation planning. This community education and engagement will extend to all communities and community members, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities, Aboriginal communities and targeted stakeholders such as seniors and young Victorians.

6. National resilience, relief and recovery agency

Victoria notes the complex nature of the recovery challenges highlighted by the Royal Commission and acknowledges that the Commonwealth has committed to establishing a national resilience, relief and recovery agency by 1 July 2021. Victoria supports the view that a greater national focus is needed on investing in resilience and risk reduction both prior to emergencies and as part of recovery. Victoria considers that the creation of this new agency should be used as an opportunity to secure ongoing, dedicated investment; build efficiencies within the sector; and provide further attention to critical areas of recovery. It is also an opportunity to pursue risk reduction efforts and best available climate science to support decision makers to take account of future climate risk. Further, coordination between national and state bodies should be streamlined, efficient and effective.

Implementing the IGEM Review and Inquiry

Victoria acknowledges the national significance of the recommendations arising from the Royal Commission and the long-term opportunities arising from its findings. We also note the overlap in reform priorities identified in both the Royal Commission report and recent IGEM inquiries.

As an immediate priority, Victoria will be focusing its efforts on implementing actions arising from the IGEM's Review of 10 Years of Emergency Management Reform and Phase 1 of IGEM's Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season. This recognises the immediate opportunities for improvement within Victoria.

The recommendations arising from IGEM's inquiries are targeted at uplifting and enhancing Victoria's specific emergency management arrangements and once implemented will provide a solid foundation for the reforms recommended in the Royal Commission's final report.

Victoria also notes that the IGEM is conducting Phase 2 of its Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season, which will specifically focus on relief and recovery. The IGEM is due to provide its findings and recommendations by mid-2021, which will need to be considered alongside the Royal Commission's findings related to recovery.

Victoria's actions to progress emergency management reforms

At the time of the 2019-20 fires, Victoria was already progressing significant emergency management reforms. These reforms will continue to be implemented and expanded to build upon our learnings, and will support the key recommendations of the Royal Commission.

Key actions underway include:

1. Emergency management planning reforms

Victoria has recently reviewed its emergency management planning arrangements. Victoria's first State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) was released in September 2020 in the lead up to the 2020-21 summer season. The SEMP sets out what is expected of agencies and communities in the event of an emergency and will streamline emergency management arrangements in Victoria. The SEMP will be reviewed in 2021 to ensure it aligns to sector best practice and addresses relevant findings of the Royal Commission.

2. Councils and emergencies

Victoria is continuing to build local government capability and capacity through the implementation of the Councils and Emergencies Project. This project is developing a capability and capacity model of local government in emergency management.

3. Recovery reform and the establishment of Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV)

In January 2020, BRV was established as a permanent and dedicated recovery agency to support Victorians in their recovery journey, and is working directly with communities devastated by 2019-20 summer's bushfires. BRV supports locally-led and locally-driven recovery, and has adopted a place-based approach to empower and work directly with communities on decisions about recovery programs and supports. BRV has established a dedicated team and has adopted Aboriginal Culture and Healing as a fifth and additional line of recovery. This recognises the importance of engaging with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities in land and fire management and the recovery phase.

Additionally, Victoria released its Resilient Recovery Strategy in November 2019. The Strategy identifies four priority actions that promote a shared-responsibility approach to emergency management and the importance of recovery planning. The Strategy builds on and complements existing initiatives in the sector that will enhance recovery outcomes and build

resilience for Victorians. Victoria looks forward to working more closely with its interjurisdictional counterparts to ensure alignment in resilience and recovery nationally.

4. Fuel management and risk reduction work

Like emergency management, land and fuel management is and should remain the responsibility of the states and territories. The Victorian Government has recently committed to further investment to better manage bushfire risk. This funding will employ more firefighters, strengthen Victoria's bushfire risk modelling and evaluation capability, and support more mechanical fuel treatment and planned burning. The funding will also support implementation of the Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Burning Strategy, enabling Traditional Owners to lead the reintroduction of cultural fire practices to restore cultural fire to more Country, and meaningfully furthering Aboriginal self-determination.

The Victorian Government is also investing in the creation and upgrade of strategic fuel breaks in the highest priority areas across Victoria. Strengthening and expanding Victoria's network of strategic fuel breaks is one of the key adaptation actions in our strategy to reduce the risks of more frequent, intense and damaging bushfires under a changing climate.

5. Protecting Victoria's biodiversity

The protection of Victoria's unique biodiversity is of significant focus for the Victorian Government and recent investments are helping threatened plants and animals survive future fires and climate change. Additional investment has also been provided to support intensified management of threats such as introduced animals and weeds after the 2019-20 bushfires.

6. Investment in capability and capacity before the 2020-21 summer season

Victoria has committed to boosting the State Control Centre's capacity by investing in additional personnel. We have appointed a dedicated Cross-Border and Preparedness Operations Manager, whose immediate priority is to assess existing cross-border mutual aid agreements for emergency management. The Emergency Management Commissioner will partner with the Cross-Border Commissioner to strengthen interstate relationships in relation to emergency management arrangements. Emergency liaison officers for critical infrastructure, such as telecommunications and food and groceries, have also been established. Further investment in incident management capability across the sector will help ensure Victoria can respond quickly and effectively to future demands. Due to the effects of climate change, it is expected that we will need to respond to multiple major emergencies occurring simultaneously in different hazard environments.

7. Critical infrastructure resilience arrangements

Victoria welcomes the Royal Commission's findings to invest in the identification and mitigation of risks to critical infrastructure during a natural disaster. Victoria has comprehensive critical infrastructure arrangements in place including legislation covering the energy, water and transport sectors. Owners and operators of infrastructure designated to have vital importance to Victoria's safety and economy must undertake an annual resilience improvement cycle in relation to their key emergency risks and preparedness. Victoria takes a collaborative approach to resilience building with industry across a range of critical infrastructure sectors.

Ongoing collaboration

Victoria extends its thanks to the Royal Commission for its consideration of these complex issues and looks forward to working collaboratively with all jurisdictions to strengthen our national emergency management arrangements.

Through a true partnership approach across all levels of government, community and industry, we can reduce risk and create more resilient communities.