

# Australian Bushfires Report



January – December 2020



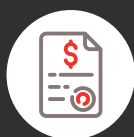
## TWELVE MONTHS INTO OUR GRANTS AND RECOVERY PROGRAM

Recovery takes time. We're here for as long as it takes.



**49,718**

people supported through the fires



**5,914**

people received bushfire grants (\$187m)



**21,563**

people supported through our recovery program



**\$207m**

disbursed or spent in 2020

Total of \$240m donated: remaining funds will support further grants and the ongoing recovery program.

## Paying our respects

My name is Jenny Brown, Wandj Wandj woman with strong connections across Yuin Country, NSW South Coast.

I live now on the lands of the Awabakal and Worimi peoples, and I pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and future.

I also pay my respects to the Traditional Owners of all the countries that burned during the bushfires, including my own, and recognise ongoing cultural connections and stewardship.

Traditional custodians have occupied and cared for this land for over 60,000 years and have so much to contribute to fire and disaster management. But during the bushfires, in many cases, we were shut out and our traditional cultural practices ignored. Many of my people did not feel safe to go to evacuation centres. We were not supported in the same way others were. But what emerged was strength and resilience as our communities supported each other.

I witnessed firsthand the damage caused to lives and property, it was devastating and incomprehensible. I listened to my people talk of how ferocious and scary the fires were. But it's not just what people said that was frightening. It's what we didn't hear; not a sound from nature. No birds, no wildlife.

I couldn't begin to understand the impact on our sacred sites, songlines, our totems, artefacts, bush foods and medicines. Our totems protect us, and we must protect them; when they or sacred sites are destroyed it tears our soul and severs our spirit.

I wondered about the harm to my totem the black cockatoo. On that day I travelled to the area a black cockatoo, landed on a tree nearby and looked directly at us. To me, it was a sign of hope, spiritual connection and strength.

Our traditional relationship and interaction to the land are integral to our health, wellbeing and culture, and it will be a long road to recovery and healing for my people.

I welcome the efforts of Australian Red Cross, my employer, to engage respectfully with First Nations communities; and to listen and learn about how to make emergency preparedness, response and recovery more inclusive and culturally safe, not just now but in future.

### Jenny Brown

Head of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy, Australian Red Cross

## Introduction

I'm both humbled and proud to share this report with you.

Humbled by the quiet strength and tenacity of Australians who endured the worst bushfire season on record, followed by a global pandemic. Who strive, day by day, to rebuild what was lost.

Proud of all who stood with them: donors near and far, companies who shared their expertise, and the emergency services workers – including 3,351 Red Cross volunteers and staff – who keep giving their all to the relief and recovery effort.

I am proud too of what we have achieved thanks to the generosity of so many people. Our work has been positively reviewed and recognised by the independent charities regulator. The Natural Disasters Royal Commission also looked closely at our work and reported favourably on our processes.

This report is a story of 12 months of endless effort, compassion, and kindness. And it is your story too.

### Kym Pfitzner

CEO, Australian Red Cross

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Yuin country, at Jerrawangala Lookout which overlooks the local Aboriginal Women's Dreaming.

# The power of humanity.

*By Thomas Keneally*

You saved strangers when you didn't know whether your own were still standing,  
Unobserved, you said, with ashes on your tongue, the crucial words of solace.  
Amidst flames so tall, and cloaking smoke, you did the small, brave things for people  
whose names you did not know.

When the palaver of economics, and the spite of politics, told us we were many,  
and were bitter, you showed we were one, and were human.

When all seemed devalued, you gave events your own unheralded value.

The value of your offered hours and days, the value of your better gifts  
and your weary valour.

You served the fleeing and stood in calamity's way.

When all seemed inhuman, you were human.

You honoured the oneness of humankind, the oneness of the earth.

You humbled us with the scale of your good will.

All we can say is, "Thank you." It is not enough to say.

But if we did not say it, we would not be worthy of you.

You have shown us plainly what it is to be a citizen of a blazing world.

**Thank you.**

This poem was donated to Red Cross by Australian novelist and historian Thomas Keneally AO,  
in recognition of the humanity shown by Australians in the 2020 bushfire response and recovery.

# Addressing the true impact of the fires

Emergencies like the bushfires upend people's lives, disrupt mental wellbeing and can fragment relationships and communities. We call this the psychosocial impact of an emergency. It's not as visible as a burnt home, but can last far longer than it takes to repair physical damage.

This is how Red Cross worked to reduce the psychosocial impact of the bushfires.

## BEFORE



**313,477 people** created personalised emergency plans with our support

## DURING



**49,718 people** were supported at 176 evacuation and relief centres, as well as over the phone.

## AFTER



**5,914 people** (and counting) could meet urgent needs, make repairs, cover funeral or hospital costs, or find a safe place to live, through \$187m in grants so far.



**21,563 people** (and counting) were assisted with recovery through 1-1 support, information and referrals.



**5,000 people** (and counting) in government and community services have been trained to support disaster-affected communities.



Communities in **46 local government areas** are covered by our recovery program. We advocate for their needs on state, local and regional recovery committees.

# Timeline of events

## 2019

- Sep 4 Fires in Qld
- Sep 6 Fires in NSW
- Sep 29 Fires in NT and WA
- Oct 30 Fires in Tas and SA
- Nov 24 Fires in Vic

## 2020

- Jan 1 ABC New Year's Eve Appeal
- Jan 6 Red Cross pays first emergency grants to people who lost homes
- Jan 18 Three-year recovery program announced
- Jan 20 Red Cross Bushfire Advisory Panel formed  
Bereavement grant announced
- Jan 31 SA fires declared under control
- Feb 3 Red Cross injury and residence repair grants begin
- Feb 9 NSW fires declared under control
- Feb 20 Royal Commission into National Natural Disasters established
- Feb 27 Vic fires declared under control
- Mar 11 World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic
- Mar 30 Recovery program underway
- Apr-Jun 1,460+ people applied for a grant the first time
- Apr 1 Red Cross rebuild/re-establishment grant begins
- May 28 Red Cross extends grant application dates as new people come forward
- Jul-Dec Further 1,739 people applied for a grant for the first time
- Oct 24 Australian Charities and Not-For-Profits Commission review released
- Oct 30 Natural Disasters Royal Commission report tabled in Parliament
- Nov 19 Additional support grant announced
- Dec 17 Additional support grant payments start
- Dec 31 Red Cross emergency, injury, repair and re-establishment grants close



*Jack with his dad Swampy, who's now rebuilding on his property.*

Photo: Australian Red Cross/Aysha Leo

## Recovery: not starting again, but moving forward

On 30 December 2019, Jack was staying with his parents Sharyn and Tom (Swampy) in Wandella, New South Wales.

"[That night] I went to bed and I woke up about four, my brother-in-law banging on the door," he recalls. "It was really hot and windy. He was yelling 'We've got to get out of here'. We loaded as much as we could in separate cars.

"It was still dark – it stayed dark all day that day. There was a lot of confusion."

They sought safety in Narooma, but the town was also in the fire's path, so they headed to Jack's aunt's house in Canberra.

"That was the most stressful because we had our lives to worry about. [The air] was toxic. You couldn't get a mask. It felt like the apocalypse."

Eventually, when it was safe, they made it back to Wandella. "Every second house was totalled. I was still living on a prayer, thinking we would still have a house, but it was gone."

At the bushfire relief centre, Jack helped his mum fill out a Red Cross grant application. "For someone as stressed out as my parents there was no mystery to it, there was a simple one-pager.

"Once mum handed all that stuff in, it was within a really short matter of time Red Cross was providing that initial relief and has continued to do so."

Swampy and Sharyn have chosen to live on their land in a campervan while they

rebuild. Red Cross grants have helped with many of the costs, but rebuilding is slow and many precious things can't ever be replaced.

Jack and his siblings are helping their parents do what they've always done: move forward. "You've lost everything up until now but you'll keep doing what you're doing, and it's only a matter of time before things start feeling like you've got something again."

# Response to the FY19/20 bushfire season

Volunteer teams remained on continuous rotation, to provide support as fires raged through communities.



We supported **49,718 people** during the bushfires from September to March



We were activated for **37 fires** across **five states and territories**



We worked in **176 evacuation, relief and recovery centres**



We **registered 64,570 people** through the Register.Find.Reunite service, helping their loved ones to locate them and services to find them afterwards

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## HELPING HER COMMUNITY TO COPE AND RECOVER

When Cann River in Victoria was cut off by fire in January, Red Cross volunteer Jenet was there to help her town. Jenet set up a relief centre in the local school, registering almost 200 people. She provided psychological first aid and organised emergency accommodation for those with nowhere to go. She recalls meeting an elderly man who had just lost his home.

“He said to me: ‘I don’t know what to do because I don’t know where to start’.

“And I said, ‘You take gradual, soft, gentle little steps. You’ll work your way through this. I’m here and there are others here too, to help you’.”





## John's gratitude is "daily and endless"

After almost 30 years as a member of the local fire brigade, John felt very prepared for last summer's bushfires. But as the fire approached his property in the town of Dorigo, New South Wales, it wasn't flames that posed the greatest threat.

"I spent a lot of time and sleepless nights moving sprinklers around, trying to keep everything wet. But the choppers were taking so much water out of the dam that feeds our springs that we ran out of water during the incident. The weatherboards in our house are extremely flammable, and also started to disintegrate with the constant smoke, embers, and the prolonged drought.

"All our water supply was contaminated. It was probably two or three weeks of constant ash, embers, howling westerly smoke that would reduce visibility down to maybe a hundred metres – it was pretty scary," he says.

Bushfires weren't the only challenges John and his partner had to face in 2020. Drought, isolation and loss have made for a very trying year. Yet he considers himself lucky, and his resilience shines through.

"We are receiving counselling, keeping busy and getting on with our lives, but some peace and normality would be good in the next year. You can only take so much.

"But we regard ourselves to be extremely fortunate. Some people just up the road lost everything."

John also received a lifeline from a neighbour, who rang him about

Red Cross bushfire grants available. Reluctantly, he submitted an application.

With the \$10,000 he received, he was able to replace the flammable weatherboards in his home, so there is no more fire hazard. He also purchased a small water tank and fire-fighting pump.

"I'm not the one to accept charity, but I cannot begin to describe the difference it's made to our lives. The money has been a godsend, it is a fortune to us," he says.

"Our gratitude is daily and endless."

# Financial assistance

As donations poured in, we rapidly expanded the financial assistance provided to bushfire survivors. Our aim was to help people when they were ready, with those hit hardest by the fires receiving up to \$70,000 in grants.



## Bereavement grant

For senior next-of-kin of those who died in the fires.

Lives lost:	<b>35</b>
Grant amount:	<b>Up to \$50,000</b>
Grants paid:	<b>35 grants (\$1.3m)</b>

*All next-of-kin who chose to accept this grant have received at least a \$20,000 payment, with an additional \$30,000 payment to those who were in continuing financial hardship.*



## Emergency grant

To support people whose primary place of residence was destroyed to meet immediate needs.

Estimated homes lost:	<b>3,117*</b>
Grant amount:	<b>\$20,000</b>
Grants paid:	<b>2,922 grants (\$58m)</b>

*\* Figure cited is an estimate provided by the National Bushfire Recovery Agency. It does not distinguish between primary residences and investment properties or holiday homes. It also does not include caravans or mobile homes that were people's primary place of residence.*



## Re-establishment grant

To help people who lost their primary place of residence to re-establish a safe place to live.

Grant amount:	<b>\$40,000**</b> for owner occupiers <b>\$10,000</b> for renters or owners of caravans or mobile homes
Grants paid:	<b>2,448 grants (\$76.3m)</b>

*People who were eligible for the emergency grant were also eligible for the re-establishment grant if they were still experiencing financial hardship. This grant was originally called 'rebuild grant' but was broadened because we learned that many people were not yet in a position to rebuild homes, but still needed to secure medium-term living arrangements. \*\* This grant was originally \$30,000 and then increased to \$40,000.*



## Primary residence repair grant

For home owner occupiers whose primary residence was structurally damaged.

Estimated homes damaged:	<b>1,248*</b>
Grant amount:	<b>\$10,000**</b>
Grants paid:	<b>2,356 grants (\$22.6m)</b>

*\*This is an estimate provided by the National Bushfire Recovery Agency. There is no complete record of how many homes sustained structural damage – including damage to critical private infrastructure such as water tanks, septic tanks and generators.*

*\*\* The grant was initially \$5,000 then increased to \$10,000.*



## Injury grant

For people hospitalised for injuries sustained as a direct result of the bushfires.

Estimated injuries:	<b>unknown*</b>
Grant amount:	<b>\$15,000**</b>
Grants paid:	<b>642 grants (\$8.3m)</b>

*\* There is a lack of nationwide data on how many injuries and mental health conditions were sustained during the bushfires. The initial allocation (\$2m) was quadrupled as more people came forward. \*\* The injury grant was initially \$7,500 but a further \$7,500 payment was made available to people with higher out-of-pocket hospital costs.*



## Discretionary financial hardship grant

For people experiencing extreme financial hardship who were not eligible for other Red Cross grants and unable to access support elsewhere.

Grant amount:	<b>Up to \$20,000</b>
Grants paid:	<b>221 grants (\$2.7m)</b>



## Additional support grant

For previous grant recipients who are receiving government support demonstrating low income and still in financial hardship.

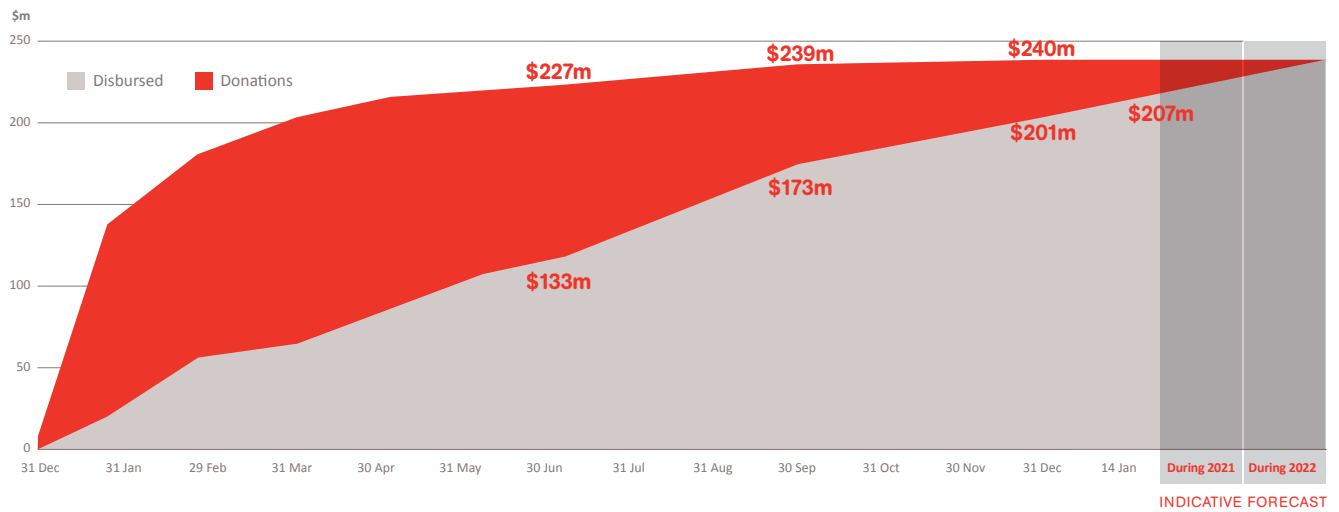
Grant amount:	<b>Up to \$10,000</b>
Grants paid:	<b>1,924 grants (\$17.8m)</b>

*There will be a second, smaller round of the additional support grant in February 2021 for those who are eligible but were unable to apply in the first round.*

Our emergency, repair, injury and re-establishment grants have now closed. A smaller second round of the additional support grant will be available in February 2021.

# How we used donated funds

## Donations and disbursements

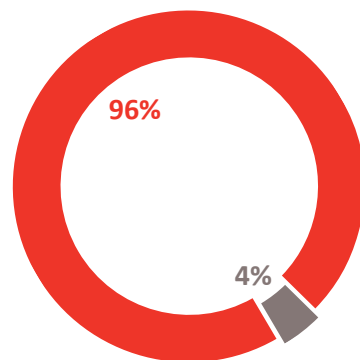


The graph above shows the rate at which funds were donated to and disbursed from the Red Cross Disaster Relief and Recovery Fund.

- We received an unprecedented amount of donations in January, which were rapidly allocated to bushfire grants, informed by the needs we were seeing in communities.
- More than \$40m was received well after the fires ended and the fund had closed. These donations had been pledged during the fires, often by organisations based overseas.
- New donations were allocated as they arrived to financial assistance for bushfire survivors.
- Applications for emergency, repair, injury and re-establishment grants closed on 31 December 2020 and we are currently processing those final applications.
- The remaining \$33m will be disbursed or spent in 2021 and 2022. Of this, \$15m will fund the remainder of the community recovery program. A total of \$18m will be disbursed in a second round of additional support grants to people still experiencing financial hardship and to people who applied for existing grants before the end of December 2020. It will also be used for discretionary financial hardship grants and to cover any further essential administrative support costs.

## How donations have been helping

As at 14 January 2021



**96%** **Help for people and communities**  
Through financial assistance, our emergency teams who provide support in evacuation centres, accommodation pods and a three-year recovery program.

**4%** **Essential administrative support costs**  
These costs make the rest of our work possible. They enable our grant payments and casework team to operate. They also cover IT systems, fraud prevention and our fundraising, bank and platform fees.

## Essential support costs

We have worked hard to keep administrative support costs as low as possible and they are now at 4¢ in the dollar, and are essential to our bushfire relief and recovery program. In 2020 they covered a dedicated grant payments team, enhanced fraud prevention and data security measures, fundraising costs, casework support for grant applicants, and the promotion of grants in bushfire-affected communities. We will continue to keep further costs incurred as low as possible.

## Interest

\$353k of interest on funds was earned in 2020, and added to the funds available for bushfire-affected communities.

## Audit

The Disaster Relief and Recovery Fund was independently audited by Deloitte, as part of the Australian Red Cross FY19/20 annual report. The audited financial statements are available at [redcross.org.au/annualreports](http://redcross.org.au/annualreports).

# How we paid grants

Red Cross grants were designed with the advice of our independent expert panel and feedback from bushfire-affected communities. Paying each grant was a balancing act between compassion and diligence.



## Charity laws

Australia's charity laws govern who and how we can help. As a public benevolent institution, Red Cross must provide relief to people who are in hardship or financial distress. This was interpreted to mean we could help people who lost their primary place of residence, but not an investment property or holiday home. It also meant that we could only help *people*; not businesses, farms, animals or community infrastructure.

## Helping those who lost the most

We provided the most financial assistance to people who lost their primary place of residence, and to the next-of-kin of those who died in the fires. We also made significant payments to home owner occupiers who needed to make urgent repairs, and people hospitalised for injuries.

## Finding eligible people

No agency had a 'master list' of people whose homes were destroyed or damaged, or who were injured. Records of houses destroyed did not distinguish between primary residences and investment properties, nor did they count caravans or mobile homes that were people's

homes before the fires hit. Privacy laws and an absence of data sharing arrangements meant people who had been affected had to register with multiple agencies.

This meant people had to come to us for assistance, and we used every means possible to find them: our teams spreading the word on the ground, targeted online, print and radio advertising, postcard drops, community events and through partners like Australia Post and the Commonwealth Bank.

## Making it easy to apply

The quickest way to help the largest number of people was to accept online applications. But we knew that many people would not be able to do this easily, so Red Cross volunteers and staff with iPads helped hundreds of people complete their applications.

We asked for only the most fundamental things: proof of identity, proof of residence, record of hospital admission (for the injury grant) and proof of government financial assistance (for the additional support grant). Knowing that many people lost critical documents in the fires, and that others would struggle to supply them online, our grants team talked thousands of applicants through the process.

## Preventing fraud

We had to ensure that donor funds went to people in genuine need. We received thousands of applications from bots, as well as carefully falsified documents. We also had many applications where the address provided did not match records of fire damage. Suspected fraudulent applications were thoroughly investigated, including visual inspections where necessary, to ensure only genuine applicants received grants. Our approach was acknowledged by the charity regulator (ACNC) in its review.

## Impact of COVID-19

The pandemic and the nationwide lockdowns that occurred between March and June greatly impacted our ability to search for eligible applicants and forced us to change how we supported people. People were less able to travel to town centres or visit relatives to access the internet and apply online. COVID-19 restrictions also delayed rebuilding, leaving many bushfire survivors feeling forgotten in the wake of the global crisis.

## Helping people when they were ready

We knew from previous disasters that it would take months for some people to come forward for help. More than 1,460 people applied for the first time between April and June, and a further 1,739 people applied between July and December. As more people came forward, we extended the application dates for our grants.

People took time to come forward for many reasons. Some were living off the grid in remote locations, some were initially reluctant to ask for 'charity', some thought the money should go to those 'more deserving', and many simply needed time before they could begin the process of navigating bushfire assistance.

## Allocating funds

We allocated funds to various grants as they came in, based on decisions made by our independent advisory panel. We changed allocations depending on the funds we had and the needs we were seeing, which were often higher than official records indicated.

We increased the amount available under most grants; each time contacting previous eligible applicants and directly transferring additional funds to them if they were still in hardship.

## Other cases of financial hardship

Some people experiencing financial hardship because of the bushfires who did not meet the criteria for our grants either approached us for help or were referred to us by other agencies. Our grants team worked with each of these applicants and, where genuine financial hardship existed because of the bushfires, we were able to provide them a relief payment. A total of \$2.7m has been used for these financial hardship payments.

# Our advisory panel

An independent panel of experts informed and guided decisions on using the funds.

- **Anne Leadbeater** OAM  
National consultant specialising in disaster recovery and community resilience.
- **Hon Patrick McNamara**  
Former Deputy Premier of Victoria and Chair of Victorian Bushfire Appeal 2020
- **Ivan Simon**  
Co-Chair of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Authority
- **Hon Karlene Maywald**  
Former SA Minister for the River Murray and Minister for Water Security, now Managing Director Maywald Consultants

Panellist bios are available at [redcross.org.au/bushfirepanel](https://redcross.org.au/bushfirepanel).

The panel also included Red Cross staff:

- **Judy Slatyer**  
CEO (until October 2020)
- **Kym Pfitzner**  
CEO (October 2020 onwards)
- **Noel Clement**  
Director Australian Programs
- **Belinda Dimovski**  
Director Engagement and Support
- **State and Territory Directors**  
contributing as required

# What grant applicants said

In September, we sent an email survey to 4,861 people who had received a bushfire grant, asking for their feedback and insights. A total of 606 people responded.



## Where Red Cross did well

- 89% said that the grant, combined with support from other agencies, was sufficient to make a difference
- 90% were very satisfied or satisfied with the experience of applying for a grant
- 88% were satisfied with the time it took to receive their grant



## Where Red Cross could improve

- Only 67% felt they knew where their application was up to
- Only 63% were clear on who to go to for financial support



## How COVID-19 impacted grant recipients

- Increased financial uncertainty, loss of employment, increased isolation, feeling of 'being left behind' and rebuilding slowing down



## Recommendations for recovery agencies

- More face-to-face support, including home visits
- Regular check-in calls
- improved data sharing arrangements so people don't have to register with multiple agencies
- More local community presence

We've made continuous improvements to our application and payment processes, including regular email and SMS updates to applicants. Our recovery program is providing the ongoing, community-based support that people requested.



## A safe place to live

Red Cross has partnered with the NSW Government, The Salvation Army and the Minderoo Foundation to provide temporary accommodation pods in fire-affected areas.

The pods, designed by Andrew and Nicola Forrest's Minderoo Foundation, have built-in electricity, water and sewer systems and are provided free to people who lost their homes in the bushfires, for up to two years.

Red Cross has committed \$2m to the program's total \$10m funding. To date, 210 pods have been delivered to people, who now have a safe base to live in while they rebuild.



Photo: Australian Red Cross/Dilini Perera

## "That's the way communities are supposed to be"

"Not many things have been able to scare me in my lifetime. But this fire, she came with one hell of a might and she showed us all how vulnerable we really are."

Walbunja Yuin woman Sherrie is an artist and an environmental ranger with Mogo Land Council. While the fires raged, she kept her family calm but in the days afterwards, she felt too over-whelmed even to leave her home, which was damaged in the blaze.

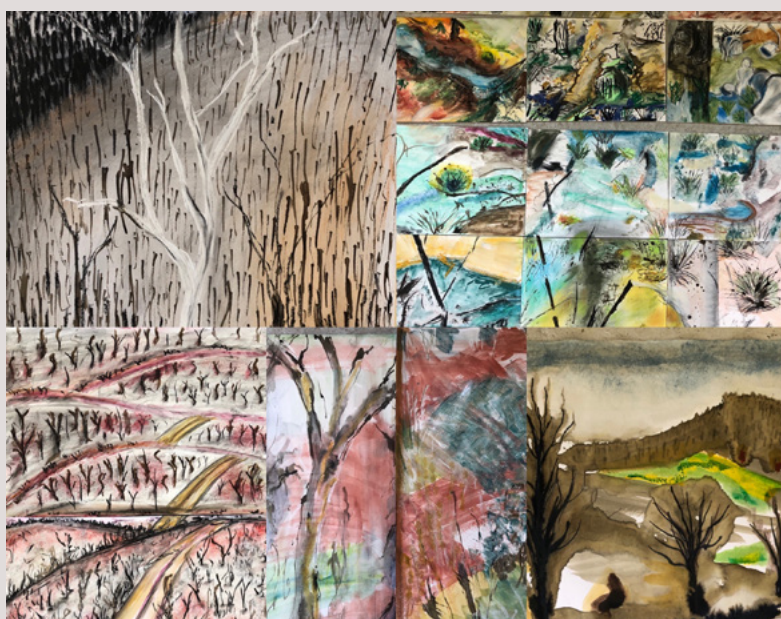
By talking to Elders and reaching out to community, she found her strength. "And then as a community, we all just started rallying around, we all just started helping each other out... that's the way communities are supposed to be."

Red Cross grants helped Sherrie replace fire-damaged items like mattresses and clothing, and even have a special birthday dinner for her son. "One thing I'm really proud of through these months is how my family has come together."

But it was the environmental damage that cut deepest. "That's taken a huge toll on my mental health ... It took a long time for me to come to terms with the fact that I do my best for the environment but I couldn't stop a catastrophe like this."

Slowly, slowly, nature is healing. The birds are returning to the trees and dragonflies, one of Sherrie's totems, are buzzing in the back yard.

She's also gone back to work as a ranger. "That shows the kids, and others in the community who look up to me, that the fire knocked me down but I'm up and walking now."



## Healing through art

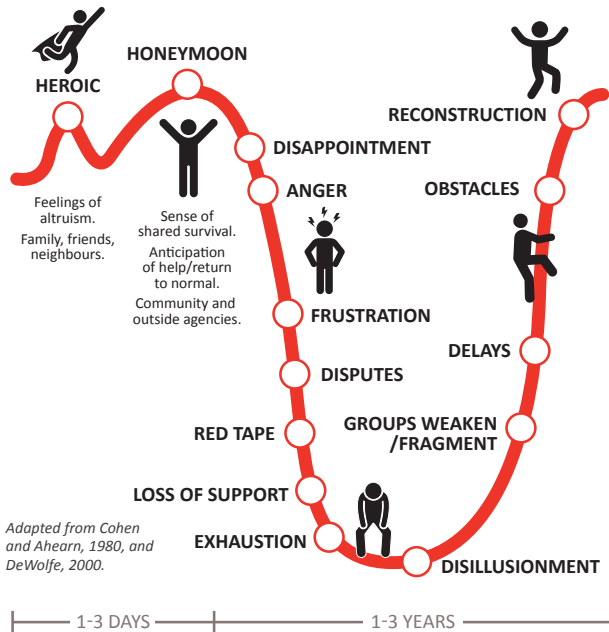
Each community finds its own localised ways to recover from trauma. Art is one of them.

Professional artist Veronica O'Leary has been supporting Cobargo residents to paint their experiences of home, loss, community and connection. The Red Cross recovery program has helped fund the art workshops. "When I saw what we had created I realised just how deep we had inadvertently gone, and I was touched by the outcomes," says Sophie, a local artist impacted by the bushfires.

The Renewal Art Project culminates in an exhibition at a local art gallery over the summer, marking 12 months since the bushfires.

# Ongoing recovery program

Recovery is a journey measured in years, not weeks or months. It goes beyond finances or rebuilding, and includes people’s sense of hope and self-worth, family security and community cohesion.



This diagram has been used for decades to describe the recovery process. Bushfire-affected communities are still navigating a painful path through exhaustion, delays and obstacles, hindered even further by the global pandemic.

This is why our recovery program will run to 2022 and beyond. We aim to help **individuals** cope with trauma and access support; **communities** to heal and strengthen their connections; and **service providers** to meet the unique needs of bushfire survivors.

*“For many people, a disaster like the summer bushfires is a watershed experience. It is often very difficult for them to go back to the life they had before.*

*“The assumption behind recovery is that you replace what you lost and you get on with your life but it is not that simple. Often people are so bewildered, confused and traumatised that it takes them many months before they can stop and think and ask: Where do I want my life to go now? That’s when they’ll make the best decisions.”*

– Dr Rob Gordon, consultant psychologist for Red Cross



We have a recovery footprint in **46 local government areas**, with recovery officers living and working in bushfire-affected communities. Around 100 trained volunteers in each state work alongside the recovery officers.





**21,563 people received support and training**  
**49,289 people reached with recovery information and resources**

On the phone and in person, in homes and at community events, we help people access the support that’s available to them. We offer a listening ear and psychological first aid to help reduce stress and trauma.

Since April, we’ve been supporting councils across NSW to call bushfire-impacted residents, checking on their wellbeing and referring them to relevant services. Our volunteers made more than 1,500 calls, with many calls lasting 60-90 minutes. As one volunteer said: *“I really have to comment on the resilience of the people I have spoken with over the past months. Most of them have dealt with whatever life has thrown at them and just got on as best they could.”*



**84 community events**

A healing through art project in Cobargo. A men’s mental health BBQ in Kyogle. A cartoon workshop for bushfire-affected kids in the Adelaide Hills. A ‘ladies pamper day’ on Kangaroo Island. Mosaics made from burnt ceramics in Nymboida.

Each bushfire-affected community finds its own way to come together, grieve and heal. Our recovery program often provides small amounts of funding for these events. We are also supporting anniversary events, as each community marks the start or end of the fires.



**149 training sessions with 2,185 people**  
**20 recovery webinars attended by 3,033 people**

Disaster-affected communities can experience a range of issues linked to the collective trauma they have experienced. Increased rates of depression, family violence and self-harm have been recorded. It’s vital that health and community services understand what their clients may be experiencing, identify signs that people may not be coping, and work with the strengths that exist in their community.

We ran training sessions for local government and community service providers, both in person and online when lockdowns were in place. Drawing on recognised experts, these sessions explored the ‘double disaster’ of bushfires and COVID-19, decision fatigue, supporting children, supporting wildlife carers, facilitating community recovery and other topics.

**Emerging issues in bushfire-affected communities**

**Top 10 themes reported to bushfire recovery officers from communities**

1. Concerns about people’s mental health
2. People feeling overwhelmed
3. People feeling tired and fatigued
4. People feeling angry and frustrated
5. Reports of community division
6. Need for increased engagement from council and services
7. Reports of financial hardship
8. Praising community resilience and leadership
9. Feelings of isolation
10. Need for community connection

Source: Recovery Situation Analysis November 2020, Red Cross Bushfire Recovery Program

Our bushfire recovery officers serve as eyes and ears on the ground. We contribute to **68 recovery committees** at local, regional and state levels; and each month we prepare a thematic analysis of issues emerging in bushfire-affected communities. This enables us to advocate with and on behalf of the communities we serve, whether for targeted services, events or funding.

**The bushfire recovery program will continue to the end of 2022 or further.**

# Our response reviewed

## Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission (ACNC)

Australian Red Cross was one of three charities voluntarily reviewed by the charity regulator on its handling of donations, administration costs and response to the fires.

The ACNC found that Red Cross had allocated all donations received during the bushfires to bushfire-related activities and costs required to deliver them; that it had appropriate skills and expertise to deliver its programs; that it regularly released information to the public; and that it had sound fraud detection practices in place, enabling it to identify suspicious applications for grants.

In an article in *The Australian* on 23 October, Commissioner Gary Johns refuted allegations that charities were 'withholding money'. *"The three charities had to deliver their programs not knowing the number and size of donations, or when they would arrive; and not knowing the number and size of requests for aid, or when they would land. ... Who, other than an experienced charity, would have enough experience to make that judgment about how much money to hold back?"*

The full ACNC report is available at [acnc.gov.au](http://acnc.gov.au).

## Natural Disasters Royal Commission

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disasters was established by the Commonwealth Government to gather evidence on the management and mitigation of disasters.

Red Cross provided a voluntary submission to the commission, and Noel Clement, Director of Australian Programs, gave evidence at two public hearings on the role of charities.

The Royal Commission released its report in October. It included that:

- charities including Red Cross had delivered urgent relief services and financial assistance
- while public expectation was that funds would be distributed in the immediate aftermath of the fires, it was important that sufficient funds remained to support people throughout their recovery
- it was common for people to wait for weeks or months after a disaster before seeking help, and those people might miss out if funds were distributed too quickly
- charities needed time and resources to verify claims and prevent fraud
- charities needed to communicate frequently and transparently about how donated funds are used and the timeframe for distribution
- there may be a need for a single regulator and scheme governing fundraising, instead of the current situation where states and territories have different fundraising laws

The full report is available at [naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au](http://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au).



## RECOGNISED FOR SERVICE

Red Cross volunteers and staff received the NSW Bushfire Emergency Citation from the NSW Government for their tireless efforts to support those affected by the fires. Premier Gladys Berejiklian presented the award in December to seven volunteers, who accepted it on behalf of 636 of their colleagues involved in the relief and recovery effort.

# Insights and recommendations

Red Cross has shared the following recommendations with the Natural Disasters Royal Commission, as well as state and territory reviews.

## It's time to act on climate change.

Last summer's bushfires are a stark sign of what the future holds, if Australia does not act decisively to reduce the speed of climate change, mitigate its impact, and build community resilience to frequent and severe disasters.

## Resilience needs investment.

The true cost of disasters is not only physical, but social and economic. The Australian Business Roundtable<sup>1</sup> has found that an annual investment of \$250m in disaster mitigation could generate budget savings of \$11 billion. Other analyses have found savings of between \$3 and \$8 for every dollar spent. Relatively small investments now will support Australians' economic prosperity, while also reducing years of stress and heartache for those who experience disasters.

## Being prepared is vital at every level.

Families, communities, businesses and governments can all take practical steps to build their resilience. These steps, which range from personalised emergency plans, to disaster drills, business continuity arrangements and investments in community infrastructure, are crucial to protecting lives, assets, social cohesion and the survival of our communities.

## We can make it easier for people to access support.

Bushfire survivors told us how exhausting it was to apply to multiple agencies, collect evidence and re-tell stories of trauma. Improved data collection and sharing arrangements can make this much easier. For example, a trusted information source is one option that could be used by multiple agencies as a single point of disaster impact verification, enabling us to provide funds directly and quickly to affected people.

## Money does not equal recovery.

Most people who received grants told us that regular contact and check-ins from Red Cross were equally important, and kept them from feeling forgotten. The issues reported to our recovery teams show that communities need ongoing psychosocial support, which evolves with their needs over time.

## First Nations expertise is invaluable.

All emergency management agencies must do much more to include and learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This includes respecting and incorporating traditional land and disaster management practices, ensuring relief and recovery centres are welcoming and inclusive, building respectful partnerships with First Nations organisations and communities, and engaging more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and volunteers.

## National standards could guide emergency response and recovery.

We recommend a set of national standards to guide and inform the work of all agencies involved in emergency management. These standards would provide benchmarks for the community to assess delivery. They should be driven by people's needs, based on evidence, ensure transparency, guide resource allocation, and apply to all organisations involved.

## Donors need better information.

The majority of people who donated during the bushfires thought their money would be distributed in weeks, if not days. We commit to doing all we can to give donors clear information about the reality of distributing funds after a disaster, the need for long-term recovery support, and the practical challenges of providing financial assistance.

1. The Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities was formed in 2012 to influence public policy via evidence-based reporting on the unsustainable cost of disasters on life, property and the economy. It's members are from Australian Red Cross, IAG, Munich Re, Optus and Westpac Group.



## THE POWER OF PEOPLE

The Boomerang Meeting Place in Mogo became the town's recovery hub after the bushfires. As Yuin man Keith says: "We knew we had a catastrophe on our hands and we swung into action. "The wider community didn't know we were capable of doing what we did. Run by Aboriginal people, but for the wider community, not just Aboriginal people. "We had Red Cross and a number of people come and support us...but we had the place. We had the venue to present everything, distribute everything. And we had the people power."



Photo: Australian Red Cross/Aysha Leo

## Couple blown away by kindness and generosity

“I expected that I’d be in a house pretty much now,” says Nirbeeja.

But for Nirbeeja and her partner Peter, having a house is still a long-term dream. Last summer’s fires destroyed almost half of Kangaroo Island. Peter and Nirbeeja escaped with their lives and some essentials, but everything else was lost.

For the past 12 months, they’ve sheltered in a camper trailer, a van, a tent and a temporary accommodation pod.

“There were some really trying times, times where we were just about at the bottom of our patience and resilience. It was a real struggle,” says Peter.

They were living self-sufficiently before the fires, which meant that the task of rebuilding has been particularly challenging and time-consuming. From getting debris cleared, to installing a power source – first a generator, now solar – putting in plumbing, rebuilding orchard enclosures, and getting their new shed equipped with everything they need to live day-to-day until they

can get a house rebuilt, this year has been hard work.

The clearing of debris took much longer than expected because so many homes were destroyed. “We couldn’t do anything until that rubbish was gone. We were coming here twice a week and were still in that highly emotional stage, stressed to our eyeballs. We’d put out some feed and water stations for the animals and that’s all we had the energy to do. We were just exhausted,” recalls Nirbeeja.

“Going through a disaster, affects you so much more deeply, mentally and emotionally than you could ever expect,” adds Peter. “Surviving day to day, staying sane, staying positive and just looking after your own wellbeing takes so much of your energy.”

Yet Peter and Nirbeeja are quick to speak of good things, too. Witnessing the recovery and regeneration of the bush around them and seeing the animals

return to their property has been great source of strength and solace.

They’ve also taken comfort in the generosity they’ve seen.

“Complete strangers who donated to the Red Cross, who wouldn’t know us from a bar of soap but they’ve all given financially, that has been an amazing help for us this year, because it has taken the pressure off,” Peter reports. “Whenever we’ve needed money to do things, it’s been there.”

The bushfire grants the couple received helped them to rebuild their shed - the one they live in until they can get their house rebuilt - install a solar system, rebuild their orchard and buy essential household items, such as a fridge and beds, and tools for rebuilding.

“We’ve had amazing help from everyone ... the giving from humanity has really blown me away, and Red Cross has been a huge, huge help,” Nirbeeja concludes.

# Thank you to supporters at home and overseas

## These organisations represent our top financial donors

Apple	Canaccord Genuity	Foster's	Laser Clinics Australia
A2 Milk	Capgemini	Foxtel	Lendlease
Accent Group	Carnival Australia	Fulton Hogan	Liberty Financial
Accor Hotels	Carsales	Gandel Philanthropy	Lion
AESOP Foundation	Cartier	GE Foundation	Loan Market Group
Afterpay	Catch.com.au	Genesis Care Ltd	L'Oréal Australia
Air New Zealand	CBRE	GHD Sydney	Mapletree Investments
Amcor Limited	Chanel Australia	Gilbert & Tobin Lawyers	Mastercard
American Australian Association	Charter Hall	GlaxoSmithKline Australia	Maurice Blackburn
American Express Foundation	Chep	Google	Mazda Foundation
AMP Foundation	Chevron Australia	GPC Asia Pacific	McDonalds
ANZ	Chicago Mercantile Exchange	GPT Group	Mecca Brands
Ansell	China Steel Corporation	Great Heights Charitable Fund	Medicines Australia
Apple	Chubb Security	Gumtree	Melbourne Cricket Club
Campbell Arnotts Group	Citi Group	GVC Australia	Mercer
Arts Centre Melbourne	City of Sydney Council	H & M	Merrimac Middle East
Ashurst LLP	CMV Foundation	H&R Block	Michael Hill Jeweller
ASX Limited	Coles Group	Hewlett-Packard	Michael Kors
Aussie Home Loans	Colgate-Palmolive	Hillside Australia New Media	Microsoft
Australia Post	CommBank	Hisense	Mirvac
Australian Football League	Conoco Phillips	Hitachi Australia	Mitsubishi Corporation
Australian Nursing Federation	Costco	Holden	Mortgage and Finance Industry Collective
Australian Olympic Committee	Country Road Group	HSBC	Mortgage Choice
Australian Unity	Crickit Australia	IBM Australia	Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia
AV Jennings	Crown Resorts Limited	ING	MSN
Bakers Delight	CSL Innovation	Inpex	MTR Corporation
Bank of America	David Jones Limited	Intuit	Munro Footwear
Baxter International Foundation	Dell Australia	Isaacson Davis Foundation	NAB
BHP Foundation	Diageo	Itochu Australia	NCL Australia
Bluescope Steel	Dulux Group	Janssen-Cilag	Newmont Mining
BMW	eBay	JB Hi-Fi	Next
Boohoo.com	EDL Group	Jefferies LLC	Nippon Paint
BP Australia	Endeavour Energy	JP Morgan Chase	Nomad Restaurant
Breville	Ernst & Young	Kathmandu	Oceania Cruises & Regent
Broadsheet	Essilor Australia	Kering	Seven Seas Cruises
Bunnings	Estee Lauder	KFC	OneBookShelf
Bupa	F45 Training	King & Wood Mallesons	Oracle
Burberry	Facebook	Kirkland Lake Gold	Origin Energy
California Community Foundation	Far East Land	Klarna	Packer Family Foundation
	Fitness & Lifestyle Group	KPMG	Paphitis Foundation
	Flexigroup	La Trobe Financial	Paul Ramsay Foundation
	Flybuys	Laing O'Rourke	PEXA
	Ford Foundation		

Pickles Auctions	Samsung	Swisse	TK Maxx
Posco	Sanofi	Sydney Airport	Transurban
Priceline (Australian Pharmaceutical Industries)	SAP Australia	Tabcorp	Uber
PVH	Scenic Tours	TAL Community Foundation	UBS Australia
PWC Foundation Trust	Serendipity Software	TEG Dainty	UFC
Qantas	Shell	Telstra	Uniqlo
QBE	Singapore Airlines	Tennis Australia	United States Tennis Association
REA Group	Society of Women Leaders	Tetra Pak	UTC Australia
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Roche	Suncorp	The Trustee for JLT	YUM! Brands
Salesforce	Suntory	Ticketmaster	Z Zurich Foundation
	Super Retail Group	TikTok	
	Supercell Oy		

### **Organisations whose invaluable in-kind support helped keep costs low**

King & Wood Mallesons, EY, Accenture, Microsoft, Deloitte, KPMG, Land Rover and HWL Ebsworth, among so many others.

### **Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies who donated funds**

American Red Cross	French Red Cross	Mongolian Red Cross Society	Singapore Red Cross Society
Austrian Red Cross	German Red Cross	New Zealand Red Cross	Spanish Red Cross
Red Cross Society of Azerbaijan	Hong Kong Branch of Chinese Red Cross	Palau Red Cross Society	Swedish Red Cross
Belgian Red Cross Society	Icelandic Red Cross	Papua New Guinea Red Cross Society	Swiss Red Cross
British Red Cross	Irish Red Cross Society	Philippine Red Cross	Thai Red Cross Society
Canadian Red Cross Society	Italian Red Cross	Polish Red Cross	The Netherlands Red Cross
Czech Red Cross	Kiribati Red Cross Society	Red Cross Society of China (Taiwan Red Cross Organisation)	Tuvalu Red Cross Society
Cyprus Red Cross Society	The Republic of Korea National Red Cross		Vanuatu Red Cross Society
Danish Red Cross	Latvian Red Cross		
Estonian Red Cross			

### **Governments who, with their National Societies, supported our response to the bushfires:**

Government of Tuvalu, Government of the Republic of Korea, Government of the Republic of Estonia, Government of Mongolia

## Our respect to:

All those who endured the bushfires  
Who bore their losses with a strength that humbled us  
Who protected and cared for each other  
Who face the daily task of rebuilding their lives, homes and communities  
**You have shown the power of humanity in the face of disaster.**

## Our endless gratitude to:

All those who donated with a generosity we did not expect  
Who gave up their pocket money or went without to help others  
Who ran marathons and auctioned precious items and held pub quizzes  
Who gave their time, energy and expertise to help bring comfort and hope  
**You have shown no crisis is too big to make a difference.**

## Messages of thanks

**Almost every day, we've received messages like these from bushfire survivors.**

*"The first couple weeks are crucial. Your mind is befuddled, your heart is broken and front-and-centre support is so beneficial. The Red Cross van that visited our block when we were first there and provided moral support, cool drinks and a helping hand was such a godsend."*

*"It is a humbling experience reaching out for help, but the people who processed our application were kind and understanding. The money we received has made a huge difference, not just in helping us replace what was fire damaged, but will help prevent an ongoing financial cascade and further grief."*

*"In the same sense that people don't know what it's like to go what we went through, they also might not know what it's like to be helped out like we have as well. The power of giving has been pretty strong."*

Cover images: Our gratitude to Marianne, Swampy, Lynne, Jack, Paul, Sherrie, Peter, Kim and all those who shared their stories with such courage and generosity. Read more stories at [redcross.org.au/stories](https://redcross.org.au/stories). Photographers: Aysha Leo, Dilini Perera, Rodney Dekker

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