

Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

Eurobodalla Shire Council

Response to the Notice and Summons to Give Information

(NTG-HB1-06)

29 April 2020

## **Executive Summary**

This submission of information is made in response to the Notice and Summons to Give Information to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

The initial request to provide the information by 21 April 2020 was extended to 30 April 2020, by written agreement received by Council on 20 April 2020.

The following information is in addition to the submission made to the Royal Commission via the web-portal with the identification number NND.001.00133 (including 3 attachments).

As agreed, the responses herein cross references Council's initial submission and where necessary, adds further information to assist the considerations of the Royal Commission.

The information provided is done so in good faith in pursuit of improved solutions to assist and protect our community during natural disasters.

Council thanks the multi-agencies teams in the Incident Management Team and Emergency Operations Centre, the many volunteers, Agency and Council personnel and local contractors on the frontline, the Australian Defence Force, media and our community for the role they played in aiding our community during the devastating 2019-20 bushfire season.

Council also recognises the extraordinary support provided throughout and since the bushfires by our local State member the Hon. Andrew Constance MP. We also thank Fiona Phillips MP for her support as our local Federal Member for Gilmore.

**1. Describe the key functions of the Council relevant to bushfire mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.**

The primary agency for bushfires is the NSW Rural Fire Service. The RFS is an independent State Government agency and does not act on behalf of Council. The RFS does deliver some outcomes for Council by agreement (such as hazard reduction burns on lands under Council's control).

Council provides a support role under various elements of the NSW Government legislation as outlined below.

Council has the following main roles:

- i) Bushfire mitigation – participating agency as a land manager
- ii) Bushfire emergency preparedness and response – supporting agency under the SERM Act 1989, and as a provider of infrastructure services
- iii) Bushfire recovery – lead agency at the local level under the SERM Act 1989 working with the NSW Government agencies who have prime responsibility for most actions.

The functions Council undertakes are outlined within Council's adopted Delivery Program and Operational Plan. These plans are advertised to the community and input requested each year prior to formal adoption by Council.

The relevant sections of the Delivery Program and Operational Plan 2019-20 can be found under section 3.1 on page 35 at the following link:

<https://www.esc.nsw.gov.au/inside-council/community-and-future-planning/delivery-program-and-operational-plan/current-adopted-plan/19.DPOP-2019-DOCUMENT-WEB-1.pdf>

The outcomes against these measures are reported to the community. By way of example, the link to the annual report for 2018-19 is attached here, with pages 94-95 outlining the specific outcomes achieved in that year.

<https://www.esc.nsw.gov.au/inside-council/community-and-future-planning/performance-reporting/2018-19/ESC-2018-2019-ANNUAL-REPORT-MASTER-AW-01-compressed.pdf>

The following information expands on these roles.

**i) Function of Council in bushfire mitigation & preparation**

The primary agency for coordination of bushfire mitigation and preparation is the NSW Rural Fire Service. The RFS:

- coordinates bushfire risk and mitigation planning across all land tenures
- provides community education
- develops community safety plans for specific high risk villages
- selects and approves Neighbourhood Safer Places
- undertakes the Aider Program to assist residents who are infirmed, disabled or elderly
- assesses any customer service queries identifying potential bushfire risks on parcels of land, regardless of ownership
- assesses referred development applications and provides advice on planning decisions

Coordination of bushfire mitigation across land tenures is achieved via the Eurobodalla Bushfire Risk Management Plan (EBFRMP) taking a non-tenure approach. This plan is developed by the RFS with input from the participating agencies, Council and other parties on the by the Eurobodalla Bushfire Management Committee (EBFMC). The EBFMC is administered by the RFS and meets typical 3-4 times per year.

The plan is submitted by the RFS to the NSW Bushfire Coordinating Committee for approval. The current plan (2011) is available on the RFS website at the following link:

[https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/2366/Eurobodalla-BFRMP.pdf](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0017/2366/Eurobodalla-BFRMP.pdf)

The EBFMC has reviewed and endorsed a new draft plan on 17 October 2019. The RFS submitted the new draft to the Bushfire Coordinating Committee in the second half of 2019. Further information in the draft plan can be obtained from the RFS.

For high risk villages, the RFS has also worked closely with communities to develop Community Protection Plans specific to that village. Where Council has a role in maintaining areas within that village to assist the delivery of Community Protection Plan outcomes, the RFS collaborates with Council and seek our input into the work required by Council prior to adoption of the plans.

Examples of Community Protection Plans in the Eurobodalla LGA include:

- a) South Durras Community Protection Plans [https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result\\_1335\\_result\\_page=9](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result_1335_result_page=9)
- b) Rosedale Community Protection Plan [https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result\\_1335\\_result\\_page=9](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result_1335_result_page=9)
- c) Guerilla Bay Community Protection Plan [https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result\\_1335\\_result\\_page=4](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result_1335_result_page=4)
- d) Mossy Point Community Protection Plans [https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result\\_1335\\_result\\_page=6](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result_1335_result_page=6)
- e) Nerrigundah Community Protection Plan [https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result\\_1335\\_result\\_page=7](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result_1335_result_page=7)
- f) Potato Point Community Protection Plan [https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result\\_1335\\_result\\_page=8](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result_1335_result_page=8)
- g) Tinpot Community Protection Plan [https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result\\_1335\\_result\\_page=10](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/know-your-risk/community-protection-plans?result_1335_result_page=10)

In the rural areas, most of the adjoining lands is either private to private, private to National Park or private to State Forest lands. Approximately 78% of the Eurobodalla LGA is either National Park or State Forest. Council has no role in bushfire mitigation in these situations.

Council has a specific role as a land manager to undertake fire mitigation on land under its control. Typically, these lands include public reserves, Crown reserves under Council's control and freehold or leased lands.

Due to the nature of the Eurobodalla, Council has an extensive length of bushland reserves and/or freehold Council land on the urban interface.

Council employs a full-time Fire Mitigation Officer to assess the risk and oversee delivery of works to manage the program of works, largely focussed on the bushland urban interface. The risk management work is delivered within the available budget and the legislative processes set by the NSW Government.

These works are undertaken in accord with the policy adopted by each new Council following the four year election cycle with public advertisement and consideration of input from the community. The following link is provided to the existing policy.

<https://www.esc.nsw.gov.au/inside-council/council/council-policies/policies/Bush-Fire-Risk-Management-Policy.pdf>

Council pro-actively pursues grants under various NSW Government programs via the RFS to supplement the works it can achieve within its own resources. It should be noted that local government across Australia collect only 3% of all taxes. These grant funded works are specifically identified and agreed with the RFS, with reports submitted each year on the work achieved against the grant funds provided.

Council received a grant under the NSW Rural Fire Fighting Fund Allocation 2019-20 for hazard reduction of \$124,700. This grant was advised on 1 October 2019. Earlier notification of grant funding would allow improved planning and delivery of works prior to the summer.

The works on Council controlled lands are prioritised to focus on higher risk areas with attention to asset protection zones (APZ) within Council controlled lands. These lands are maintained by a variety of mechanical means (eg slashing, grooming) and/or hand clearing works. These works must be undertaken in accord with the NSW Rural Fire Service Bush Fire Environmental Assessment Code 2006. The following link is provided to the Code which is publicly available on the RFS website.

[https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0014/24332/Bush-Fire-Environmental-Assessment-Code.pdf](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0014/24332/Bush-Fire-Environmental-Assessment-Code.pdf)

Mitigation within the strategic fire advantage zones (SFAZ) is typically undertaken by burning. Council relies on the resources within the RFS to undertake such works and coordinates these activities directly with local RFS Officers. The available windows to undertake such hazard reduction burns, results in some SFAZ works being deferred to future years.

All outcomes on APZ and SFAZ work are reported by to the EBFRCM.

Council also:

- a) Owns all RFS assets, incurring the cost of depreciation within its operating statement, even though the NSW Rural Fire Service is a State agency. Council believes all RFS assets should be immediately transferred to the ownership of the NSW Government.
- b) Funds the upfront cost of maintenance and repair of all building assets, which is usually paid back to Council in the following year. Council believes this should be the full responsibility of the NSW Government.
- c) Makes a contribution to the operation of the State, regional and local Rural Fire Service based on the formula set by the NSW Government. Eurobodalla ratepayers funded an amount in 2019-20 of \$741,780 . Council believes this should be the full responsibility of the NSW Government.

This funding arrangement is complex and unwieldy, and inconsistent with the funding arrangements for the State Emergency Service and NSW Fire & Rescue (all of which are different). Council believes all costs associated with these NSW Government services should be transferred wholly to the NSW Government.

Council makes the following direct contributions to these three State agencies:

<b>State Combat Agency</b>	<b>2019-20 Contribution by Council</b>
NSW Rural Fire Service	\$741,780
NSW State Emergency Services	\$59,245
NSW Fire & Rescue	\$166,072
<b>Total Contribution</b>	<b>\$967,121</b>
<b>Council General Rates</b>	<b>\$29,369,515</b>

The amount of State Government combat agency contribution Council pays is set by the NSW Government.

These figures exclude depreciation and maintenance of RFS and SES buildings which also impact Council's Operating Statement (budget).

Council also plays a significant role in the administrative support of the Local Emergency Management Committee (refer (ii) below). The LEMC typically meets 3-4 times per year and undertakes activities associated with preparation. However, in responding to questions from the Commission, our responses have been grouped together under the 'response' heading for simplicity.

Leading into the 2019-20 summer and in front of the fires, Council also undertook a range of tasks relating to its own operations including:

- Actively pursuing fire mitigation works on Council managed lands
- Inspecting key infrastructure (eg local roads, bridges, water and sewer infrastructure sites)
- Undertaking vegetation maintenance and/or APZ improvement, where required:
  - Batemans Bay depot (Depot buildings survived the bushfire, SES shed still burnt due to ember attack)
  - Deep Creek Dam water pump station (survived the bushfire)
  - Moruya River water pump station
  - Southern Water Treatment plant, Eurobodalla (some damage to above ground components of bores)
  - 9 reservoir sites (some impacted by bushfire, all survived)
  - Bridges (numerous timber bridges still lost, whilst damage to concrete bridges was superficial)
- Filling major plant items and available storage trailers with fuel
- Check/fuel existing power generators and bringing in additional generators for Deep Creek Dam (DCD) Water Pump Station (WPS), Northern Water Treatment Plant (NWTP) and Moruya Booster WPS. DCD WPS and the NWTP were ultimately without mains power for more than 30 days
- Establishing generator power at the Emergency Operations Centre, Council main administration building, Moruya Depot and evacuation centres to provide continuity of power supply (this was successful with only minor power losses for short periods)
- Inspection and/or clearing around major towers (where Council infrastructure exists) including:

- Peak Alone Mountain (inspected in spring, found to have been recently maintained by Forestry NSW, power supply impacted by fire & restored by Essential Energy (EE), minimal damage, multiple users (ESC, emergency services, NSW Govt, private)
- Gollaribee Mountain (handing clearing undertaken 31 October 2019, inspection post fire indicates nil damage)
- Boundary Mountain – ESC and RFS (handing clearing undertaken 1 October 2019, initial post fire inspection indicates nil or limited damage)
- Wandera Mountain – inspected in lead-up to fire, extensive clearing works undertaken in front fire, multiple towers and users, some damage sustained and power loss sustained, one tower used to restore multiple users)
- Preparation of our Yarragee Road bridge timber storage site, including splitting the storage piles (this was successful in protecting the vast majority of timber bridge stock held on the site despite the site burning in the Moruya fire)
- Moving our timber bridge stockpile in the southern area of the Shire (to suit the movement of the fire across the Shire – this was successful in retaining all bridge timber)
- Re-instating use of our Council radio systems including re-installing radios where necessary and reviewing radio procedures (this proved invaluable when power and mobile phones services was lost in key areas of the Shire)
- Relocating major plant and equipment away from high risk zones and strategically placing these items for more efficient response (this was successful with all major plant and equipment protected)
- Initiated and removed hazardous trees on the Kings Highway in front of the advancing fire to reduce the number likely to be affected as the fire advanced, with approval from the RFS Incident Controller

The experiences from the 2019-20 will be used to improve our Business Continuity arrangements leading into future summer periods.

Council will also advocate for improved action by other providers to improve resilience of service to the community (eg power, telecommunications).

## ii) **Function of Council in bushfire emergency response**

The primary combat agency for responding to bushfires is the NSW Rural Fire Service. This includes coordinating fire fighting and emergency warnings.

In Eurobodalla, approximately 78% of the Shire is either State Forests or National Parks. This will usually mean that for any significant bush fire, Forest NSW and/or National Parks will be heavily involved in the response working directly as part of the Incident Management Team under the direction of the Incident Controller (often empowered by the Section 44 Declaration under the Rural Fires Act 1997).

For emergencies requiring a multi-agency response, the combat agency or the Local Emergency Operations Controller (LEOCON) can request that the Eurobodalla Emergency Operations Centre (EEOC) be stood up to assist in the response.

Council has the role to:

- a) Chair and support the function of the Local Emergency Management Committee
- b) assist the LEMC prepare the Eurobodalla Local Emergency Plan (EMPLAN)
- c) attend Regional Emergency Management Committee meetings

- d) assist with exercises to improve familiarity with the EOC set-up and operations of the EOC during actual emergencies (a successful exercise to set up the Emergency Operation Centre was held on 19 September, 2019)
- e) make available a facility to enable the Emergency Operations Centre to operate (ie Moruya RSL Hall).
- f) provide the Local Emergency Management Officer (LEMO) to support the Local Emergency Operations Controller (LEOCON) during emergencies as outlined in the State Emergency Rescue Management Act 1989 (SERM Act)
- g) assist with the management of local roads, water and sewer
- h) support Transport for NSW, if required, to manage the Princes and Kings Highways. Council is the contractor servicing the Kings Highway from Batemans Bay to the top of the Clyde Mountain
- i) make available existing buildings to be used by NSW Government welfare agencies as evacuation centres
- j) maintain Neighbourhood Safer Places designated by the RFS including signposting where Council is the land manager

The Eurobodalla Local Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN) can be referenced at the following link.

<https://www.esc.nsw.gov.au/living-in/about/emergency-information/Emergency-Management-Plan-2019.pdf>

The role that Council actually played in the recent bushfires is summarized in the Mayoral report MR20/001 and the General Manager's report GMR20/002 to the Ordinary Meeting of Council held on 11 February 2020.

<https://www.esc.nsw.gov.au/inside-council/council/meetings/2020/february/ordinary-council-meeting-11-february-2020/Agenda-Public.PDF>

Council also assisted the RFS with the preparation of the area around the main telecommunications towers at Mount Wandera in the face of the on-coming fires after consultation with the RFS Incident Controller. These advance works saved the main telecommunications tower allowing key telecommunications assets to be transferred from one damaged tower to the remainder, restoring ABC radio and television well before otherwise would have been the case.

Council was also able to assist with local knowledge, expertise and resources in the response phase. This was evident when the New Years Eve fire went through cutting the north south transport corridor (both the Princes Highway and the coastal route via George Bass Drive). Knowing the criticality of restoring a north-south connection, and the likely scenario, both routes were inspected on the same day in the ebb of fire fighting activities by the Director Infrastructure Services and plans established to reconnect accelerate hazardous tree removal and restore the critical north-south connection via Council roads (North Head Drive, George Bass Drive, Coronation Drive, Beach Road) to connect Moruya to Batemans Bay and beyond. This route served to allow evacuation of tens of thousands of people out of Eurobodalla within the next few days and prior to the next anticipated firestorm. Further information on roads is contained within Council's initial submission.

Report GMR20/002 also outlined the recovery arrangements put in place at that time.

Council's submission to the Royal Commission provided on 27 March 2020 also provides further detail in regard to many aspects of the response as well as key recommendations for the future.



## **Eurobodalla EOC Facility**

The Eurobodalla EOC was established in make-shift arrangements at the Moruya RSL Hall. The facility was progressively adopted as the fire event progressed and the threat increased. This facility is not designed for the intended purpose. It is a credit to the committed multi-agency personnel that they were able to function at such a high level within this facility.

Separation from the RFS Incident Management Team (IMT) made coordination more difficult. It is now well accepted that a co-located facility with appropriate technologies, facilities and support systems, is best practice.

Council has been advocating to the NSW Government to fund, build and maintain a purpose built regional integrated emergency services precinct in Moruya with a purpose-built emergency operations centre.

This was the subject of a multi-agency review and recommendation by Lt Gen Ken Gillespie AC, DSC, CSM to the NSW Premier of NSW in 2018 to proceed with a new State-owned facility in Moruya. This recommendation was supported by then Ministers Constance, Hazzard, and Grant.

NSW Government emergency agencies acknowledged that the existing facilities within Moruya for the RFS, Ambulance and Fire & Rescue are all in need of upgrade and/or replacement. Moruya is the agreed location for a regional emergency services facility.

The NSW Government is currently in the process of planning the by-pass of Moruya and a new regional hospital, also likely to be located within Moruya. Now is the ideal time to plan and deliver an integrated solution for emergency services within Moruya for the Eurobodalla community to include at least:

- a) NSW RFS (State, regional and local)
- b) NSW F & R
- c) NSW SES
- d) NSW Ambulance
- e) A purpose-built Emergency Operations Centre and training facility

Council implores the NSW and Australian Government to urgently fund a modern State owned Regional Integrated Emergency Services facility in Moruya with a purpose built Emergency Operations Centre co-located with the other agencies outlined herein.

- 2. Describe key current processes for the conduct by or on behalf of the Council of any assessments of:**
- a. degree of risk;**
  - b. community and/or critical infrastructure vulnerability; and**
  - c. preparedness,**
- from the perspective of natural disaster. In providing your response, please identify the frequency at which such assessments are conducted, and any relevant legislation, policies or strategies pursuant to which they are conducted.**

The Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) is a multi-agency committee established under the SERM Act 1989 with representation from all key agencies including the RFS and other combat and support agencies.

The hazards and risks posed by natural disasters in Eurobodalla LGA are outlined within the Eurobodalla Local EMPLAN on pages 21-25.

This plan is reviewed every three years by the LEMC and was last reviewed and endorsed by the LEMC on 4 July 2019. This plan is then referred to the Regional Emergency Management Committee for review and approval. Our plan was considered and approved by the REMC on 12 September 2019.

The publicly available component of the EMPLAN is available to the public on Council's website at the following link.

<https://www.esc.nsw.gov.au/living-in/about/emergency-information/Emergency-Management-Plan-2019.pdf>

Specific details of officers, evacuation centres and critical infrastructure are not made available in the public document for confidentiality reasons. Information relating to evacuation centres is only made available for the event to ensure people are directed away from harm given the prevailing circumstances specific to the disaster at hand.

The review processes from the recent bushfire event are already being used to further improve the EMPLAN. For example, the:

- Entire 132kVA main power feed lines from the north will be added to the list of critical infrastructure (responsibility varies across the network from Endeavour to Essential Energy). These main power lines service the whole of the Eurobodalla Shire with no redundancy plan. The key electricity substations are already identified in the plan.
- Private/corporate telecommunication towers will be added as critical infrastructure (a request has already been forwarded to the Regional Emergency Management Officer asking the State EOC to provide detailed information in this regard). The main telecommunications towers (eg for ABC radio) are already incorporated into the EMPLAN.

The specific information pertaining to bushfire risk across Eurobodalla is referenced in the EMPLAN (on page 26). The bushfire risk plan is coordinated by the RFS as outlined in response to question 1. This risk plan is also available to the public on the RFS website (as the primary agency responsible for bushfire). There is also a direct link from Council's website to the RFS website.

The management of bushfire risks from lands under Council's care and control, in Council's role as a land manager, are also outlined in our response to question one.

The bushfire risk from land owned by others, is managed by the RFS, through the Eurobodalla Bushfire Risk Management Plan and the power invested in the RFS under the Rural Fires Act 1997.

- 3. Describe whether and how information obtained from processes of the nature identified in response to (2) above is:**
- a. made publicly available;**
  - b. communicated with relevant State and Territory or Commonwealth agencies, authorities and other parties; and**
  - c. used to inform practical arrangements implemented by the Council, other relevant government agencies, and individual landowners in the following natural disaster management phases:**
    - i. mitigation;**
    - ii. preparedness;**
    - iii. response; and**
    - iv. recovery.**

The response to questions 1 and 2 provides answers to the questions above.

Relevant information is made readily available to the public via the RFS website, with appropriate links also provided from the Council website.

Council's website has a generic emergency information page that outlines responsibilities and provides links to appropriate agencies. The page was updated with bushfire specific information during November as fires approached and regularly thereafter to ensure the community had the right information and links to response agencies. Prominent banners on the homepage linked direct to RFS for fire updates and the emergency page for other information including evacuation centres, disaster welfare, stock and animal welfare. This site will continue to be updated and improved, relying on links to the NSW Government agencies who have responsibility for education of the community.

The RFS has responsibility for on-going education of the community on bushfire preparedness, including property preparation and bushfire survival planning. For further information on the details of their education campaigns leading into each fire season, we recommend the Commission make direct contact with the RFS.

The RFS conducts extensive education programs such as their 'Get Ready' days to strongly encourage the community to prepare their properties and bushfire survival plans, referencing the information on their website. This includes extensive local media coverage well before and leading into each summer period.

This is supplemented by RFS communications during the specific events. For instance, in the lead-up to the New Years Eve fire impacting Batemans Bay, information on the relevant and safe evacuation centres for this event was provided to the community via a public meeting held in Batemans Bay on 22 December 2019. Door knocking by NSW Police and SES in rural areas west of Mogo, Nelligen and the Jerremadra targeted communities predicted to be most impacted. This community meeting and later, others, was broadcast by Far South Coast RFS using the Facebook Live platform and streamed by media outlets including emergency broadcaster ABC Southeast, some reaching >21K views.

In this bushfire event, the Emergency Operation Centre was also able to access the support of the Council Communications Manager to further supplement RFS communications activities. This meant that the RFS communications were reinforced by regular Emergency Operation Centre updates prepared in collaboration with the local RFS. Updates contained information for residents from all the response agencies and included localised updates about fire predictions and RFS instructions to the community about relocation and shelter in place options, what to expect at evacuation centres,

power and water supply, road closures and detours, and messages for communities to return home after fire-fronts had passed. Created by the Emergency Operations Centre multi-agency team to be media and community friendly, updates were emailed twice daily to media outlets, community associations, licensed clubs and other community hubs, and published on the local council Facebook page. While power was out, local police attended the three evacuation centres twice daily to present the update via loudspeaker. Hard copies were left at the centres and delivered to other community hubs when available and safe to do so.

Council's LEMO and Mayor also provided direct video and radio interviews when this was appropriate, mindful to align with RFS messaging, and/or to build on the media provided by the RFS. This particularly related to non-fire fighting activities such as restoring access, water supply, waste and other related matters.

Further comment is provided within the initial submission to the Royal Commission.

**4. Describe current processes for the establishment (including site selection, design, construction, capacity) operation and regulation of natural disaster shelters (e.g. “Neighbourhood Safer Places” or similar) within the State of New South Wales, including in particular, key functions of the Council.**

Neighbourhood Safer Places (NSPs) for bushfires are identified as ‘places of last resort’ by the NSW Rural Fire Service. NSPs are only to be used when all other options in a resident’s bushfire survival plans cannot be put into action safely.

The RFS continue to provide clear messaging to the community to plan well and leave early rather than rely on NSPs. This is especially emphasised for people with special needs such as the elderly, people with a medical condition or people with disability, or who are not physically or mentally able to defend your own property (without support).

The NSPs approved by the RFS are included on the RFS website.

<https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/neighbourhood-safer-places>

The selection of sites for place of last resort by the RFS takes account of the ability to maintain these sites so they remain suitable for use in times of emergency. The RFS is responsible for inspections to ensure NSPs are in a condition for use. Council routinely undertakes inspection and maintenance of these areas where the chosen sites are on Council owned or controlled land (except for RFS Sheds).

NSPs are not evacuation centres and do not include provision of support from welfare agencies and often do not include other facilities.

The RFS approved NSPs in Eurobodalla include:

- Wharf Street car park, Nelligen
- Maloneys Beach Reserve, Maloneys Beach
- Hanging Rock Oval, Batemans Bay
- Malua Bay Beach Reserve
- Jack Buckley Park Reserve, Tomakin
- Mossy Point foreshore reserve, Mossy Point
- NSW RFS Training Building (maintained by RFS – burnt in fires)
- Moruya airport/North Head Drive reserve
- Moruya showground, Moruya
- Preddeys Wharf, Moruya Heads
- Tuross Head Country Club Car Park (not Council maintained)
- Kyla Oval, Tuross Head
- Bodalla Bowling Club (not Council maintained)
- Nerrigundah RFS shed (maintained by RFS - burnt all around – saved lives in this fire)
- Tin Pot RFS Shed (maintained by RFS)
- Potato Point (specified intersection)
- Dalmeny campground, Dalmeny
- Bill Smythe Oval, Narooma
- Tilba Tilba sportsground, Tilba Tilba

The Belowra RFS Shed in the remote Belowra Valley also performed the role as a NSP in these fires and reportedly saved the lives of those who sheltered within it.

Neighbourhood safer places are not intended to support pets or livestock.

**5. Describe the key practical steps taken by the Council to monitor and/or audit the implementation and/or effectiveness of planning and development laws and policies which they administer, on mitigating the risks posed by bushfires and other natural disasters.**

The key planning and development laws and standards related to bushfire are not developed by Local Government. They are developed by the NSW Government with significant scientific and expert bushfire management advice. Council is not resourced nor does it have the necessary skills required to undertake detailed assessment of the effectiveness of the construction and asset protection standards applied. This has historically been undertaken by government funded bodies and the learnings used to inform the review of planning and construction standards applied.

Notwithstanding the above, anecdotally it would appear that those homes constructed to current standards have performed much better in the recent fires than those which were not constructed to current standards, having been constructed prior to their introduction.

Council has a role in the assessment and determination of development applications in accordance with the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act, Rural Fires Act and Planning for Bushfire Protection. Under some circumstances development is required to be referred to the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) for assessment. In such cases Council cannot approve the development without the concurrence of the RFS. The concurrence is normally issued subject to conditions which if the development is approved by Council, are included in the development consent.

Prior to the construction of the development a construction certificate is required to be issued by the principle certifying authority (PCA). The PCA is appointed by the developer and can be Council or a private certifier accredited by the Building Professionals Board. In issuing a construction certificate the PCA must ensure that the proposal complies with any relevant conditions of development consent and the appropriate construction standards. During the construction and prior to the issue of an occupation certificate the PCA undertakes inspections and compiles information to satisfy themselves that the development is compliant.

Council has no role in the auditing of services undertaken by private certifier. The Building Professionals Board has the ability to audit the functions of certifiers however Council is not aware of any program undertaken by them in regard to monitoring or auditing the implementation of bushfire management and construction standards. This matter would need to be examined with the Building Professionals Board.

Once an occupation certificate is issued for a development there is no further monitoring or auditing of the building's compliance or the maintenance of the building in compliance with relevant standards by Council. Any such program would be cost prohibitive and outside of the resource capacity of Councils.

The RFS undertake public information and education in respect to property protection each fire season. The Commission may wish to seek information from the RFS as to the extent of information provided in respect to landscaping and property protection to mitigate risk from bushfire, and whether the RFS believes additional resourcing is needed to deliver these programs.

What is evident from this experience, is that despite the extensive campaigns by the RFS, including 'Get Ready' days, some residents only undertook property clean-up once there was fire in the broader Eurobodalla landscape. This was evidenced by the late calls from the community to Council to provide additional green waste services as people moved to clean-up in the midst of the summer

period, rather than residents undertaking property protection in the winter/spring and maintaining this throughout the summer period.

The other concerns raised by some residents, was the lack of active property protection by some non-resident landowners. However, this has not been evidenced by any detailed research.

The RFS website provides good resources for the community to better adapt existing dwellings and prepare for bushfire. This includes an individual property specific 'bush fire household assessment tool' which produces a 'to do list' for the landowner.

<https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/prepare-your-property>

**The RFS must remain the source of education in relation to bushfire.** Council is neither resourced, nor does it see this education as our role. This education is best delivered at a State level with local RFS education officers tailoring this information to the LGA bushfire risk management plan.

That said, the Australian Government may wish to fund a review of the information available across Australia and formulate this into a common on-line education piece. This could then be more widely referenced through national media, and already popular shows such as Gardening Australia, Better Homes and Gardens, the Garden Gurus so as to extend the reach of existing education programs. This should be supported by appropriate evidenced based analysis to assess the penetration and effectiveness of such campaigns.

The other issue that has been raised from time to time, is the different alert levels used by different agencies and jurisdictions. The Australian Government may wish to review the variations and recommend a single set of alert levels across all jurisdictions and for all different types of emergencies.

With so much of Australia impacted by the bushfire last summer, the Australian Government may also wish to work with State Governments to fund more specific research of performance outcomes of new building standards versus older building standards. The role landscaping played in the outcomes from these bushfires may also be worth further research. This research could then inform appropriate adjustments, if needed, to current building standards and/or RFS education programs.

As so many existing buildings were constructed prior to standards designed to mitigate bush fire risk, particular attention should continue be paid to the affordable adaptation of existing dwellings. The Australian Government may wish to consider some form of financial incentive program that encourages residents to upgrade existing dwellings in bush fire prone areas.

[https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/4365/Building-Best-Practice-Guide.pdf](https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0018/4365/Building-Best-Practice-Guide.pdf)



**6. Having regard to the impacts of the 2019-2020 bushfires, in the assessment of the Council, is there any scope for (in a natural disaster context):**

***a. review and enhancement of land use planning and development laws and policies administered by the Council;***

The extent of bushfire impact on property was closely related to the proximity of the bushland. In Eurobodalla, this bushland environment is more prevalent in the rural landscape. Where the bushland environment continues through the urban footprint (such as North Rosedale), the fire impacts were higher than other areas.

Anecdotally, a greater number of homes lost to the bushfire in the Eurobodalla were constructed prior to the current planning considerations and construction standards related to managing bushfire risk. However more specific research is required to formally examine the specific outcomes in the Eurobodalla and other bushfires in this respect.

For older homes in rural areas, many would have been constructed prior to the introduction of bushfire construction and management standards. The asset protection zone (APZ) may not reflect the lower standard of building construction in relation to bushfire protection. There needs to be a simpler and more cost- effective process to encourage provision of improved APZs on these properties.

In particular, there appears to be a need to relax environmental and biodiversity conservation considerations and controls to allow improved protection to homes without undue cost to the landowner. These arrangements should also apply to dwellings being rebuilt post the fire.

If these changes are not made, the current situation will prevail, which is often cost prohibitive as a result of the environmental and biodiversity conservation assessment and offset requirements.

In addition, the objectives of the relevant legislation and policy related to the protection of biodiversity and the management of bushfire risk are currently in direct conflict. There needs to be a clearer priority given to the management of bushfire risk once the broader strategic direction is to allow development in certain locations.

This places the need for governments to have a more rigorous and strategic position on biodiversity protection and management at a regional scale and having less of a reliance on site by site assessments through the development assessment process.

Linked to this there needs to be greater consideration to mechanisms to support landowners in the management of biodiversity, especially where governments make the decision for the benefit of the broader community that the protection of biodiversity over private lands has a higher value than achieving any development outcome.

There is also an opportunity to educate the community on works that can be undertaken to buildings that were constructed prior to the introduction of bushfire construction standards, especially to assist in protection against ember attack. Many of these opportunities are able to be undertaken at relatively minor cost such as leaf/gutter guard, metal gauze on windows, covering of air vents and minor openings with metal gauze etc. There is already good information available on the RFS website to assist in this education.

There is anecdotal evidence that through ember attack, landscaping adjacent to dwellings may have contributed to their loss. There needs to be an examination of the contributing factor of landscaping

in terms of its location and species type. Further there needs on-going education of the public around landscaping, management thereof, and general requirements and priorities for bushfire preparedness. The RFS website already has information available to assist in this regard.

Education associated with bushfire, should remain the responsibility of the NSW Rural Fire Service.

***b. prioritised protection of key community assets (including access roads and emergency evacuation routes) and critical infrastructure; and/or***

This has been covered extensively in Council's submission to the Royal Commission made on 27 March 2020.

We particularly reiterate and extend our thanks to:

- Forestry NSW for the excellent collaboration and sharing of resources to re-open and clear roads in the most fire impacted areas of Eurobodalla (on top of their fire fighting efforts)
- Transport for NSW who collaborated and shared resources to manage road closures and undertake tree clearing and removal of fire affected hazardous trees on the Kings Highway, Princes Highway and major transport routes
- Essential Energy for their efforts during this firestorm event, as they were able to provide almost thirty generators to assist during power outages, including a 500kVA unit to run the Batemans Bay sewage treatment plant for almost four weeks.

All parties willingly provided a direct liaison with Council and/or the EOC, which allow an integrated, more rapid and safer response.

**Major transport routes**

The Princes Highway north and south and the Kings Highway east to west are critical transport links into and out of Eurobodalla. All were compromised in the 2019-20 bushfires.

The other critical access roads within Eurobodalla LGA serving as major evacuation routes include:

- Durras Drive South Durras
- South Batemans Bay Link Road (Princes Highway to George Bass Drive)\*
- Beach Road (Batemans Bay to Surf Beach)\*
- George Bass Drive (Batehaven to Moruya airport)\*
- Dunns Creek Road
- Tomakin Road\*
- Broulee Road\*
- North Head Drive\*
- South Head Drive
- Hector McWilliam Drive
- Dalmeny Drive
- Bermagui Road\*

Those shown with an asterisk (\*) can be used as alternate routes to the Princes Highway if it becomes unavailable.

These same regional and local distributor roads carry the highest traffic volumes in the Eurobodalla, experienced almost half of all road crashes on local roads in Eurobodalla despite representing only

9% of the local network, and will experience high growth as further development proceed and visitation to Eurobodalla increases.

There is no viable alternate east-west connection to the Kings Highway to access Eurobodalla other than the Snowy Mountains Highway and/or MR92 (Nowra-Nerriga-Braidwood).

Recommendations either included in Council's previous submission or outlined herein include:

- Arterial transport networks (Transport for NSW, Council)
  - Transport for NSW should undertake additional tree work along the Princes Highway and Kings Highways to improve the resilience of the highways during natural disasters. (This should also provide positive improvements in road crash severity and reduce maintenance of the highway road pavements. Note that Transport for NSW is undertaking additional tree work on the Clyde Mountain section of the Kings Highway with this work advised to be scheduled to occur prior to the end of the 2019-20 financial year. This is a positive move by Transport for NSW). The Australian and NSW Governments should continue to upgrade these highways with consideration to improving resilience in natural disasters as one of the considerations.
  - Council should review major regional and distributor roads under its control and pursue grant funding with a view to improving resilience in natural disasters (at least to the extent required to meet the objectives within the Eurobodalla Road Safety Plan 2019-21).
  
- Telecommunications resilience (Australian and NSW Governments, Telco, landowners)
  - ensure clear responsibility for the preparedness of telecommunication sites
  - review design requirements for improved resilience of telecommunications infrastructure
  - review and upgrade existing infrastructure to improve resilience
  - improve information flow to local EOCs and IMT before, during and after the response
  - provide alternate power supply systems to improve resilience of telecommunications in event of loss of power
  
- Electricity Power Supply (Australian and NSW Government, Essential Energy, Endeavour Energy)
  - Essential Energy & Endeavour Energy improve the resilience of the main power supply to Eurobodalla
  - Investigate more resilient power pole arrangements on other priority lines (eg metal poles such as those within the Araluen valley which survived the fire)
  - Investigate alternate and back-up systems to critical telecommunications infrastructure
  - NSW and Australian Governments should provide additional grant funding for the capital upgrades to Essential Energy & Endeavour Energy infrastructure to make the power supply system more resilient and/or to provide remote power supply systems as outlined above.
  
- Water and Sewer (Council)
  - NSW Government should add to the \$25.6M funding already provided to Council for the Eurobodalla Southern Water Storage by waiving all NSW Government

- costs to reduce the overall capital required for this essential infrastructure project (eg land costs from the NSW State Forest and biodiversity offset costs)
  - Australian Government should co-fund the Eurobodalla Southern Water Storage by providing a \$51m contribution (as per the application by the NSW Government).
  - Council is continuing co-funding of the Eurobodalla Southern Water Storage to improve water supply security and resilience
  - Council should review its resilience planning for the remainder of the water supply and sewerage system including vegetation management and alternate power supply systems
- Fuel Service Stations
  - Government should regulate that all service stations must provide upgrades to allow access alternate power supply systems. The Government should provide a reasonable time period to make these alterations.
    - Alterations to allow a generator to be plugged directly in to run fuel bowser and payment with appropriate staff training in place to implement same (in place by 30 June 2021)
    - Provision of permanently mounted alternate power generation on-site in place by 30 June 2023)
  - Provision of permanently mounted alternate power generation on-site for all new service stations
  - Note: Council advocated direct to Caltex who have since agreed and taken action to install a generator permanently on-site at the Batemans Bay North Service Station on the basis that this is a regional town.
- Major food retailers
  - Government should regulate that all major food outlets must provide upgrades to allow access to alternate power supply systems. The Government should provide a reasonable period of time to make these alterations.
    - For smaller retailers, alterations to allow a generator to be plugged directly in to run the store including refrigeration units with appropriate staff trained (in place by 30 June 2021)
    - For larger retailers, provision of on-site alternate power generation with staff appropriately trained (in place by 30 June 2021)
    - All new major food retail outlets to be required to incorporate permanent alternate power provision on-site within the initial design and construction
- Aged Care Facilities
  - The Australian Government should work with the NSW Government to ensure to all age care facilities have suitable business continuity arrangements in place to 'stay in place' during natural disasters including alternate power supply systems on site.

The recommended priorities for the Australian Government to support those above is:

- water security – water supply to the southern areas of the Eurobodalla proved very challenging in the peak of these fires. The loss of water would have caused major unrest in the community in the face of advancing fires and made the practical defence of properties extremely challenging. The Australian Government should part fund the Eurobodalla Southern Water Storage so this shovel ready project can proceed

- electricity – the loss of power throughout these fires proved extremely challenging with consequent impacts to the emergency response efforts and community. The loss of power also impacted water, sewer and telecommunications services. Measures such as those outlined in this response, should be taken to improve the resilience of the power supply network. Measures should also be undertaken by private parties and service providers to reduce their dependence on mains power supply during short term outages for critical functions.
- arterial transport routes – the Australian Government should review existing land transport programs to assess the benefits in improving the resilience of transport routes in natural disasters. There is strong alignment in the removal of roadside hazards for improving road safety and reducing the risk of falling trees. Similarly, duplication of the Princes Highway, provision of town by-passes and provision of widening to accommodate overtaking lanes and/or sealed shoulders, increases the road width and reduces the risk of full road closure in natural disasters. Similar upgrades should be undertaken to the Kings Highway.
- telecommunications – the loss of communications to the public proved extremely challenging with consequent impacts to advising the community. Whilst it can be expected that telecommunications will likely be impacted by natural disasters, the reality is that the community has become over-dependent on these services. Telecommunications providers need to do more to ensure their infrastructure is more resilient in natural disasters.

It is recommended that the Commission seek separate advice from local RFS Incident Controllers in respect of any additional resources from the Australian Government to support fire fighting.

***c. enhanced processes for the conduct, publication and dissemination of risk assessments, including to:***

- i. relevant State and Commonwealth Government agencies); or***
- ii. individual landowners' (i.e. as a tool in their natural disaster planning).***

Refer comments in 6 (a) and Council's initial submission to the Royal Commission.

The NSW RFS should continue to be responsible for education of the community in relation to bushfire.

Local EMPLANs include risk assessments undertaken by the multi-agency LEMC. These are shared with the Regional EOC.

The local Eurobodalla Bushfire Management Committee also prepares risk maps and these are shared with the NSW Bushfire Coordinating Committee.

Relevant Commonwealth agencies could access these documents as they are public, although an agreed approach between the NSW and Australian Government may be more efficient method of document and information sharing should this be required.

Any new processes should not create additional 'busy work' for Councils, State or Australian Government personnel.

If the Commonwealth is to be involved in the response and/or recovery phases of natural disasters to a higher level, then clearer agreed processes need to be determined and communicated through to each local LEMC. These options can then be written into Local EMPLANs and Recovery Plans.

Additionally, the NSW Government should give consideration to:

- restructuring Emergency Management in NSW including modifying the LEOCON and LEMO roles to provide a NSW Government funded Local Emergency Management Coordinator for LGAs such as Eurobodalla, reporting to the appropriate NSW Government agency
- Council to relinquish the role of Local Emergency Management Officer and move to a role similar to Essential Energy, Transport for NSW as a functional area support
- other aligned reforms to the number and form of combat agencies to bring about strategic efficiency and effectiveness gains
- shifting the role of Local Recovery to be led by the NSW Government through Resilience NSW rather than Local Government (as most agencies within the recovery process are NSW Government agencies)
- moving all emergency services infrastructure for the NSW RFS, SES and EOCs to NSW Government ownership, rather than part in Local Government ownership
- moving the funding of State Government emergency response agencies to the full responsibility of the NSW Government.

In all phases of emergency management, Local Government should play a key role aligned to their key primary functions (eg local roads, provision of water and sewer, making available existing resources to assist in response such as facilities to be used evacuation centres, providing local knowledge of community characteristic, etc). That is, in our Local Government service role.

A regional integrated emergency services precinct should be constructed in Moruya jointly funded by the NSW and Australian Governments. This should be a NSW Government owned facility and be appropriately resourced, inclusive of a purpose built Emergency Operations Centre. The other local emergency services property (ie NSW Ambulance and NSW Fire and Rescue sites) should then be sold to contribute to the net costs of the NSW Government share.

**7. Describe any key legislative, policy or other impediments on the part of the Council to additional action of the nature identified in response to (6) above.**

Refer to the responses to Questions 1-6.

The above responses reference the potential for conflict between biodiversity legislation (at an Australian and NSW Government level) and achieving a safer built environment where existing dwellings exist. Where once the cost of achieving a safer outcome would have been that associated with doing the work, the cost may now involve various studies and approvals to achieve a safer outcome. Whilst the NSW Government 50/10 rule has assisted, further review should be undertaken to assess the practical effect of this arrangement, and whether this provision should be further modified to create a safer community.

**Modifying the Emergency Management Structural Arrangements (see response to Q6)**

The current SERM Act 1989 and Rural Fires Act 1997 would require amendment to move the emergency management functions and infrastructure back to the NSW Government. A full review of related legislation would need to be undertaken by the NSW Government if this recommended course of action is to be pursued.

**8. Describe any opportunities which you can identify for additional Commonwealth involvement in matters of the nature identified in response to (6) above, e.g. in setting relevant standards, facilitating enhanced information sharing between all levels of Government.**

Refer responses to Question 6 where the Australian Government can assist.

There should be clear avenues, with appropriate privacy safeguards, for sharing of information between Government agencies during times of emergency and recovery. The normal protocols whereby a single agency would protect all information to ensure compliance with privacy provisions has hindered certainty of assistance in our recovery.

The recovery service delivered was to a high level. However, the NSW Government should consider case managers early and be prepared to resource accordingly. The myriad of agencies, charities and other options to deal with whilst in a state of trauma was for some, overwhelming.

### **Housing**

There must be clarity of roles in the context of the event. This may need to differ from the business as usual role performed by the responsible agency.

For instance, an agency may operate normally through a referral mechanism for housing and track business as usual work effectively for that purpose. However, recovery from a natural disaster requires as a 'mission critical' task, understanding the whole picture. This requires assessing the whole impact on the community, formulating a plan and systematically and pro-actively checking each impacted person to ensure those who need help have received it. Reaching out rather than waiting for traumatised community members to come in, should be a key principle. Resourcing of agencies should be bolstered during these periods to ensure these critical actions can be delivered efficiently.

This information can then be shared at a summarised level to demonstrate the effectiveness of actions and to communicate progress to the community, Recovery Committees and politicians at a Local, State and Federal level. The responsible agency can also provide an inquiry service such that matters raised with politicians, media and others, can be readily referenced, responded to, or where needed acted upon to assist.

What is also clear, is that recovery should be looked at from the perspective of the people impacted, rather than from how the agency or charity works, or its arrangements with Government. If we consider the basics of life, people must first feel safe, then have shelter, food and water.

It then follows, that the loss of dwellings in major natural disasters is a likely outcome. What this event has demonstrated, is that for any large scale event, the existing mechanisms are too slow for those who have lost everything.

This is particularly so for those on farms who have lost their homes and so much more yet need to be on farm to care for livestock, look after/restore damaged landscape, and try to commence rebuilding. Many of these farmers are remote from towns and re-accommodation into an urban rental is problematic and will often be passed over out of necessity.

Having a pre-planned housing solution that can be implemented on farm within weeks rather than months is crucial. In NSW, the housing pod solution has now been developed, working with



Minderoo and registered charities. This solution has merit in specific contexts although is not the whole solution for families.

However, disaster funding packages need to give greater consideration of the context from the impacted party's perspective. By way of example, there should have been a differential between the payment to farmers who had lost their homes. Many also lost their sheds (and the contents of same). For these people, a permanent shed that serves as temporary accommodation, then reverts to become a farm shed is a highly desirable and cost effective solution.

The economic flow on effects can also be positive provided the community can support the preferred solution. In this case, sheds, materials supply and labour can all be secured quickly locally.

The key is that the principles of looking from the perspective of the impacted people, and what the preferred solutions will deliver back to the whole of the impacted local community, should be fundamental to the considerations of Governments. Further, when developing funding relief packages, the basics of life must take first priority (safety, shelter, food & water).

### **Payments to Councils assisting in Natural Disasters**

It is our understanding that the Commonwealth controls the guidance across Australia on the payments made to Councils under the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements through their co-contribution arrangements.

Local Government has long advocated to Government about the strain on financial resources at a Council level. Whilst some progress has been made, the financial arrangements for the new opt-in provisions for a Council choosing to use day labour assist in a natural disaster, is inequitable, unreasonable and beyond our resources to fund without impact on service delivery to our community.

The current opt-in arrangements in NSW require Councils to fund 0.75% of the rates for each and every natural disaster. We have had two declared natural disasters this financial year. The upfront cost to our community would be in the order of \$400,000.

When comparing the existing disaster funding arrangements to the new opt-in funding arrangements, it appears the Councils most impacted are the mid-sized regional Councils like Eurobodalla.

In bushfires, willing Councils are further disadvantaged financially when they divert Operational staff to the response covered under a Section 44 declaration under the Rural Fires Act 1997. Our offer to assist the fire fighting agencies defend the community, regardless of land tenure or task, and by bringing Operation staff back from leave, now sees our Council financially disadvantaged. For instance, when requested to assist Forestry NSW and local contractors provide containment lines, we of course said yes. Yet our labour costs are not covered which were in the order of \$600,000.

It is important to recognise that Operational staff diverted to disaster response and recovery are paid by Council by undertaking work and charging their time direct to projects (rather than salaried officers of Council).

Additionally, to expect the clean-up to be completed within a 21 days period in natural disasters of this scale, is completely unrealistic. Eurobodalla has about 490km of roads within the fire affected grounds with thousands of trees and other debris to be removed as part of the clean-up. This clea-

up period should be extended to at least 90 days as a minimum with the ability to seek approval for an extension where circumstance warrant.

General Managers from the Canberra Joint Organisation of Councils (CRJO) have co-signed a letter (attached) to the NSW Treasurer requesting favourable consideration of our joint request for the Government to fund these costs. We understand this submission is being considered favourably as a one-off payment although the detail is yet to be provided.

Our initial submission also included the following recommendations:

- i) the NSW and Australian Government change the response funding arrangements to ensure Councils are funded for the day labour costs associated with deploying Council staff engaged in the emergency response under Section 44 declarations and other declared emergencies.
- ii) the NSW and Australian Government change the funding arrangements to ensure Councils are funded for the day labour costs associated with clean-up and rebuilding of transport and other related infrastructure without the need to sign-up to the proposed new disaster funding arrangements.

We also recommend that where Councils allocate resources to support Emergency Operations Centres and Incident Management Teams, these costs should be covered by the NSW Government as part of the emergency management response. Appropriate guidelines should be developed providing clarity.

**9. Describe effectiveness of the Council's interactions with any relevant State or Territory Emergency Management agencies and the Australian Defence Force.**

This is well described in Council's initial submission to the Royal Commission. The scale of the response was unprecedented in European history. The overall collaboration with NSW Government agencies and other adjoining Emergency Operations Centres was extraordinary.

For high risk LGAs such as Eurobodalla and Bega, the RFS should re-instate a Fire Control Officer for each LGA, rather than sharing resources across each LGAs.

The RFS should also consider:

- a) bolstering media and public liaison resources within each RFS IMT
- b) providing greater delegation to the Incident Controller to sign-off on media to ensure timely turnaround of information to the community
- c) highlighting those areas of the community unlikely to be impacted, to focus the level of heightened alarm in the areas of need, whilst reducing concern across those unlikely to be impacted

The ability of the NSW Welfare agencies and support organisations to support evacuation centres was critically strained by the limited trained resources available. In the main, this was due to the sheer scale of the simultaneous impact across NSW, and the huge numbers of evacuees locally and from adjoining LGAs. Training local people within these NSW Government agencies to a higher level to ensure initial support is available is highly recommended (and is understood to be supported by the NSW Government welfare agencies).

Key causes for the huge numbers of evacuees included:

- a) the unpredictable nature, scale, speed and night time activity of the firestorm on New Years Eve with the large number of visitors still in the Eurobodalla LGA
- b) the limited access out of the Eurobodalla due to the closures of the Kings Highway and Princes Highway due to active fire and hazardous trees
- c) the high occupancy rates in tourist accommodation in the Christmas New Year period making it difficult for welfare agencies to find temporary accommodation for evacuees (as otherwise would normally occur).
- d) the subsequent predictions of fire likely to burn to the coast from Moruya to Bermagui
- e) the movement of people from Bermagui to Narooma
- f) people heeding the strong messaging from the RFS IMT and EOC that 'leaving early was the safest option'
- g) additional door knocking of rural areas potentially to be impacted
- h) people within safer areas of main towns evacuating to evacuation centres within that same town when they would have been just as safe staying at home. Briefings at some evacuation centres allowed these people go home, whilst others needing to stay were advised to remain.

The deployment of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) assisted many aspects of the response in non-firefighting activities. The attitude of the ADF personnel was exemplary and there is little doubt that the presence of the ADF also lifted the morale of the teams involved in the response as well as the community. We are grateful for their assistance.

ADF assistance included:

- provision of emergency supplies to remote areas for people and stock
- provision of a logistic centre for donated goods at Mackay Park Batemans Bay
- clean-up of roadways and opening accesses into private properties (within the skillset limitations noting falling fire affected trees is a specialist area)
- provision of additional medical and evacuation support at Hanging Rock (ultimately not utilised)
- provision of medical presence in Narooma Library mid-January to support Narooma community and evacuation centre
- assessment of sea rescue options for coastal areas, provision of Navy ships offshore to enact this option (ultimately not utilised for evacuation in Eurobodalla)
- assistance with building an animal welfare shelter at Mogo Zoo
- assistance with accommodating visiting RFS teams in Narooma (ultimately taken over by an RFS base camp)
- assistance with clean-up of the Eurobodalla Regional Botanic Gardens
- assistance with fencing off hazards building sites in Mogo

At a State level, the ADF may have been able to play a larger role in supporting evacuation centres if the NSW welfare agencies had identified the strain on their ability to service the extraordinarily large number of simultaneously active evacuation centres across NSW.

An assessment of the current NSW Government contract arrangements for food support through the Salvation Army is recommended. Whilst this may be satisfactory for smaller events, it was inadequate for an event of this scale with the many challenges that existed at that time (large numbers of evacuees, no power, limited access to fuel, limited access to transport via the highways, limited temporary accommodation due to peak occupancy rates).

However, in the context of the scale of this event, the NSW Government agency personnel on-site and volunteer organisations at the evacuation centres did an amazing job in extremely difficult circumstances, aided and assisted by local volunteers and local clubs.

And despite the many challenges in dealing with such extraordinary numbers of evacuees, and although this was a time of significant anxiety and very poor facilities (no power, communication etc) for the community, the primary objective moving the population away from the fire front and keeping them safe for a short period was successfully achieved.

That said, provided there is an improved recognition by the NSW SEOC and the ADF itself, of the need for surety of rapid deployment of ADF resources including supporting infrastructure, there is clear scope for the ADF to assist establish and service large scale temporary evacuation camps in such large scale natural disasters.

The additional challenges of potential ADF assistance included:

- a) no clear statements of available ADF resources or capability
- b) limited clarity on potential time of arrival and/or length of stay
- c) need to fill out and bid for resources with no certainty in time driven environments
- d) re-prioritisation of ADF teams after extensive briefing of ADF teams, only to see them move to another LGA or priority
- e) some machinery was not adapted for the task at hand (eg dozer without a tree pusher)
- f) there was undue concern about the ADF displacing local resources in an event of this scale

Our own primary concern was also to ensure that the visiting ADF resources, young men and women of our country, were being tasked to work where they were sufficiently well skilled for the high risk and often specialised tasks at hand. We saw them as part of our team and wanted to ensure their safety first and foremost.

This particularly related to the falling and clean-up of large numbers of fire affected trees. The clean-up arrangements worked best when the available crews were able to integrate with Council and Forestry NSW teams, such that the works provided to the ADF personnel were within their safe capability and their time was productively utilised.

The ADF should consider deploying an Officer to a LGA like Eurobodalla of sufficient rank to be able to make a higher level of delegated decisions to deploy resources to assist in an integrate those into to the EOC resources on the ground at a local level.

Taking these matters into account, there was often greater certainty in bringing back our staff from leave, temporarily re-arranging Council resources and/or collaborating with Forestry NSW to get a more rapid and certain outcome to help the community. It is important to note that the matters at hand were time critical (eg to get food and water to people who had none, to get emergency fodder & water delivery to keep livestock alive and/or to allow access for treating & euthanising fire affected livestock).

- 10. Describe (in summary terms) any other matters which you consider relevant to your responses to the above questions, or to the Commissioners' inquiries regarding bushfire risk mitigation within Australia, in response to the Terms of Reference.**

Please refer to Council's initial submission to the Royal Commission via the web-portal with the identification number NND.001.00133 (including 3 attachments).