



Australian Government
Australian Business Register

13 June 2014

Ms Karen Chester & Mr Jonathon Coppel
Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2
Collins St East
Melbourne Vic 8003

Dear Ms Chester and Mr Coppel

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements.

Please find attached a submission to the Inquiry, which sets out how the Australian Business Register (ABR) can support government agencies in their disaster response and recovery activities.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require further information.

Yours sincerely

Mark Jackson
Deputy Registrar
Australian Business Register

Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements

The Registrar of the Australian Business Register (the Registrar) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements.

Background

The Registrar is responsible for whole of government products and services which seek to improve the wellbeing of the Australian people by enhancing business productivity. The whole-of-government services include the Australian Business Register (ABR), AUSKey and the Standard Business Reporting (SBR) program, which offer a business identification service and a registry of business information, a digital business credential and a standardised information exchange capability. These products and services streamline interactions between business and government, and provide a single source of business information for use by government agencies to improve service delivery and planning.

While the submission is not directly related to arrangements for disaster funding, the ABR is a valuable tool available to government agencies to support more timely and efficient disaster response and recovery activities, while also assisting with the prevention or mitigation of emerging risks.

The ABR is a comprehensive database of the information provided by businesses and other organisations when they register for an Australian Business Number (ABN). The ABR database includes information which is available to the public to enable businesses and consumers to verify the identity of entities they are dealing with. However, more broadly, government agencies at all levels can access more comprehensive, non-publicly available ABR data to support a wide range of community outcomes. This includes disaster response and recovery activities.

Application to Disaster Response, Recovery and Mitigation

At the end of May 2014, 455 government agencies (called ABR partner agencies) had access to ABR data. Since October 2013, 117 of those agencies have been provided with ABR data extracts for disaster recovery type activities. ABR partner agencies are granted access to ABR data under a standardised terms and conditions agreement.

ABR data were used after Victoria's 2009 bushfires to identify businesses impacted by the fires, so they could be provided with information on government assistance programs. The ABR's postcode and industry coding information was also used to identify businesses that could potentially assist with reconstruction work.

Later in January 2013, data were provided to local, state and federal agencies to support recovery from bushfires in Tasmania and floods in Queensland. In these regions, the ABR data assisted with reporting and planning of recovery activities and government support.

ABR data can also be used to prevent or mitigate the impact of emerging risks. In this context, ABR data was provided to the Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries (DPIF) Northern Territory (NT) to assist with the containment of an outbreak of a fungal disease, banana freckle, which was threatening the NT banana industry. The ABR information assisted the DPIF to establish the size of the response required, and also provided a starting point for making contact with the relevant businesses. Using the ABR data, the Northern Territory Government was able to respond quickly to the hazard, ensuring the disease did not spread to larger commercial banana growing regions in Australia.

Since September 2013, extracts of ABR data have been provided Australia wide, in response to a range of disasters. Feedback from government agencies indicates that ABR data is highly valuable in supporting disaster response activities.

Data Usage

Agencies are using ABR data for a number of purposes including:

- targeting assistance to businesses in affected areas, including clear and consistent reporting to government about businesses in affected areas;
- identifying vulnerable facilities, e.g. nursing homes; and
- making contact with businesses post the disaster.

The ABR team has put in place arrangements to ensure that they can provide support to agencies as they need it, with relevant data provided at the right time to the right people. This includes the provision of data before, or immediately after, an event occurs.

The ABR team is also working to enhance the ABR dataset to increase the utility and usability of the data for disaster recovery and response activities. These enhancements include geocoding of addresses/locations, which will allow government agencies to integrate ABR data with other data sets to assist them to make more informed decisions. It will also support a range of activities from impact assessments, hazard identification, resource allocation, mapping support for bushfires and other emergencies, as well as targeted education and assistance.

The ABR team continues to work with ABR partner agencies on other enhancements to the ABR dataset to support more efficient and effective government responses to disasters.

More broadly, a range of initiatives are underway to promote the increased use by government of a complete and single source of business information for planning and service delivery. This includes enhancing the integrity of ABR data, expanding the data set to meet emerging government needs, as well as improving access to ABR data. This will support the increased use of the ABR capability to enhance government planning; while also further supporting more effective disaster recovery and relief activities, and the prevention and mitigation of emerging risks.

Future considerations

Whilst this work is underway the primary focus is in actions that can be taken post the disaster or emergency event. Response and recovery will always be an important component of disaster situation management. However, as recent experience has shown it can be more efficient to take steps, where practicable, to mitigate even prevent the consequences of an event. This is a place where some further developments or enhancements to the ABR system may help.

The range of information held on the register could be extended to help with an understanding of the size of the operation and the nature of the work and/or stock and equipment on site. For example, a state emergency service may find it useful to know that a certain business has earth moving equipment on site where that equipment could be used to create fire breaks. The size of the operation may help where staff need to be evacuated or conversely be available to help with precautionary work. The nature of stock indicate if there are hazards in relation to what may happen if a flood or fire passed through the area.

Generally, making wide ranging information available and ensuring that the information can be quickly and easily accessed could provide significant benefits in the response and recovery area but equally with mitigation and prevention.