

Natural Disaster Funding Inquiry
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2 Collins Street East
MELBOURNE Vic 8003

disaster.funding@pc.gov.au

Dear NDF Inquiry,

Response to draft report – Productivity Commission Inquiry into Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements

The Bushfire Front is an organisation of experienced professional bushfire and land management experts in Western Australia. Between our membership we have an accumulated total of over 400 years experience in bushfire planning, science, administration and operations. Our mission is to lift the standard of bushfire management in WA so as to minimise the number, and damage caused by, large intense bushfires. Please refer to our Website for further details.

We have examined your draft report, and wish to comment on it.

First, we understand that the Commission has been asked to develop findings on the following:

- *the sustainability and effectiveness of current arrangements for funding natural disaster mitigation, resilience and recovery initiatives*
- *the risk management measures available to and being taken by asset owners*
- *the interaction between natural disaster funding and federal financial arrangements*
- *options to achieve an effective and sustainable balance of expenditure on natural disaster mitigation and recovery*
- *how stakeholders can most effectively fund natural disaster recovery and mitigation initiatives*
- *how to ensure the right incentives are in place to support cost-effective decision making*
- *mechanisms and models to prioritise and evaluate mitigation opportunities*
- *the role of urban planning, land-use policy and infrastructure investment in supporting cost-effective risk management*
- *options to fund identified natural disaster recovery and mitigation needs.*

Your draft report is over 400 pages in length, making it difficult to read and to draw out the issues which we think need to be reviewed. However, we can probably summarise your findings as follows: Basically the bushfire

problem in Australia can be addressed by improved land use policy, better urban planning and improved standards of house construction.

I am afraid we cannot agree with this.

In the first place, improved land use policy, urban design and housing construction standards will make a difference in *new* urban developments but will do nothing for the very large number of semi-urban and rural residential developments that exist already in bushfire prone areas. These areas cannot be retrofitted, at least not at the level of planning policy and design.

In the second place, this approach will not maximise the opportunity to improve bushfire damage mitigation. The single most important factor affecting bushfire intensity (which equates to damage, and to difficulty of control) is heavy fuels in bushland areas.

The effect of heavy fuels over-rides every other factor, included climate change.

In our experience, the best planned suburbs with the best built houses will still be damaged by intense bushfires driving out of long unburnt bushland. Without a systematic program of fuel reduction in parks and forests adjoining (or intermingled with) residential areas, firefighters will continue to lose fires under Moderate to Extreme fire weather conditions, and fires will be damaging and costly.

In other words, your proposals go only about 15% of the way forward.

We are aware of the opposition to fuel reduction burning from environmentalists and some academics. On the other hand we are not aware of any practical and economic alternative that these people propose. Western Australia once led the world in fuel reduction programs, and during this time experienced no killer fires, even under Extreme weather conditions.

Two other critical issues:

1. The role of the Federal government in promoting responsible bushfire management by the States:

The Federal Government funds firefighting and recovery/restoration after fires. This amounts to rewarding States for failed bushfire management. The States and their agencies know that they can mismanage the land, and the Feds will pick up the bill when huge bushfires occur.

We recommend an entirely new system: (i) the Federal Government develops a template for excellence in bushfire management by a State jurisdiction; (ii) the work by the State is audited and if in compliance with the standard, it receives federal funding; (iii) funding will focus on preparedness and damage mitigation, not on post fire recovery/restoration; and (iv) State jurisdictions that do not comply do not get federal disaster funds for bushfires.

In essence we are saying that it is better, and cheaper and more humane to fund bushfire preparedness and damage mitigation than to come in afterwards and fund restoration.

2. Funding research

Currently, huge sums of Federal money are being spent on useless research studies, mostly in Universities such as the ANU and the Universities of Woolongong and Murdoch University. This money should be redirected to fire prevention and damage mitigation at State and Local Government levels. There appears to be no proper mechanism

for deciding on the allocation of research funds, so that money is going to researchers and to projects that have no hope of improving bushfire management in Australia. On the contrary much of it seems to be going to researchers whose main interest is to make bushfire management more difficult and less likely to be effective. This is wasted money.

Finally, we note that the Productivity Commission is holding hearings all around Australia related to this inquiry except in WA. This is disappointing, as we have one of the highest bushfire problems in Australia, and there are many instances of where precious funds are being wasted. We urge you to come to WA and to listen to what we have to say.

Yours sincerely

Roger Underwood
CHAIRMAN
October 20 2014