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Driving business success for consulting firms in the built and natural environment

28 Apr 20

Royal Commissioners
National Natural Disaster Royal Commission

Email: rcnda.submissions@royalcommission.gov.au

Dear Royal Commissioners,

Submission – Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

I write on behalf of Consult Australia regarding the public consultation for the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. This letter outlines our submission, which focuses on:

- Areas of the recent bushfire emergency response that worked well;
- Opportunities to improve future bushfire emergency responses; and
- Some broader reflections on how Australia prepares for future national natural disasters.

Consult Australia is the industry association that represents businesses that provide design, advisory and engineering services for the built and natural environment. We represent an industry comprising some 48,000 firms across Australia, ranging from sole practitioners through to some of Australia's top 500 firms, with a combined revenue exceeding \$40 billion per year.

Many of our member firms have also been involved in responses to previous natural disasters, including the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes, and Queensland flooding. The related expertise of our member firms includes emergency and disaster response assessments and management planning, resilience auditing and development planning, sustainability strategies, and community engagement.

Areas of the bushfire emergency response that worked well

The Black Summer bushfires are a strong example of Australians and all levels of governments, industry and the community pulling together to respond to one of the most significant national natural disaster events in Australia's history. We believe a number of these response efforts, both those that were planned as part of a strategic response and ad hoc/reactive measures to the circumstances, provide lessons to inform how we respond to future bushfire emergencies. Areas that we believe the Royal Commission should consider further as part of a lessons learnt exercise are below.

- Many of our member firms and others across industry provided support the bushfire response through their expertise and charity efforts. We believe these efforts highlight a positive message that industry can play a proactive role in helping to respond to bushfire emergencies and stand ready to support government activities. For Black Summer, examples of these efforts include:
 - proactively assisting local governments by supporting the clean-up and disposal of impacted sites (with many requiring specialist expertise due to hazardous substances such as asbestos),
 - providing pro bono assistance to conduct impact analyses on dead wildlife and conservation status reviews of fauna, and
 - raising thousands of dollars by coordinating staff donations.

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- The level of coordination and communication between different levels of government was quite effective when the Black Summer bushfire events moved into the recovery phase. We thought there were many good examples of where Australian, state, territory, and local government agencies were partnering well together and with communities to ensure recovery efforts were harmonised between different responsibilities, effectively designed, and appropriately targeted towards those in most need. The delivery of the disaster recovery allowance to those affected is one example.
- We believe the decision by the Victorian and New South Wales governments to declare states of disaster/emergency in regions facing the highest risk of bushfires, as a proactive and precautionous measure to minimise human impacts, was another effective response to the Black Summer bushfires that worked well. While there was a negative economic impact in these regions, the declaration of disaster/emergency is an example of a lever that governments can use to effectively minimise human deaths and injuries from the rapid spread of bushfires into developed areas. It also allows governments to ensure response efforts can quickly assess damage to critical infrastructure.

Opportunities to improve future bushfire emergency responses

Despite the significant tragedy of the Black Summer bushfire events, this Royal Commission does provide an opportunity to reflect and improve future bushfire emergency responses – something that was also achieved in the Victorian Royal Commission into Black Saturday in 2009, with many of the findings and recommendations from this inquiry not only improving response and recovery efforts in Victoria but also across the country.

We believe the immediate response to bushfire emergencies, and the upfront recovery efforts, can have a significant influence on the downstream impacts of these events – from an individual, community, and economic perspective. We therefore believe it is positive that this Royal Commission is investigating the immediate response and recovery efforts. We recommend that the points below be considered.

- Critical infrastructure needs to be rapidly rolled out to impacted communities in the immediate recovery efforts. We believe re-establishing infrastructure assets and networks is one of the most important components in bringing normality back to communities. Infrastructure is often described as the fabric that binds a society together, and this becomes even more important when our communities are challenged and stretched by natural disaster events.
- Assessing whether or not to replace 'like for like' infrastructure and built environment assets that were damaged or destroyed by bushfires. The opportunity to design more resilient assets to withstand future natural disaster risks must be explored. Our industry plays an important role in considering the natural environment factors that impact these assets, key to creating a complimentary and harmonious built and natural environment. The ongoing benefit of this approach is to limit the risk or impact of future bushfire events, and potentially creating more environmentally sustainable communities.
- Despite the delivery of targeted support services for vulnerable communities and local governments being fairly well handled, we do believe there are opportunities to build on this further.

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At a Commonwealth level, we support the model used with the North Queensland Flood Recovery Agency and the National Drought Recovery Agency which aims to enable locally led, understood and implemented solutions whilst leveraging the broader expertise and experience across government agencies and industry.

- We believe governments could consider how to better coordinate the strong desire from industry to help support recovery efforts. We recommend government consider establishing an industry advisory group to help coordinate the future responses. This will help governments to effectively harness the extensive expertise and appetite of industry to assist with response efforts. There is a wide range of industries that would be valuable additions to an industry advisory group, including representatives from the engineering, infrastructure, social services, tourism, humanitarian and disaster response, and agriculture communities.
- The bushfires demonstrated how vulnerable our basic infrastructure is to damage in widely spread bushfire events. Before Black Summer, it would be difficult to imagine many major transport links being closed for several days or weeks at a time (the Princes, Kings, Snowy Mountains and Monaro highways being examples), and widespread water and telecommunication infrastructure outages due to their dependence on impacted electricity supplies. Governments at all level could therefore invest more time and resources into actively planning how basic infrastructure can be more reliable, which will in turn ensure these basic needs of the community are more likely to be met during these types of events.
- Another option to determine how the Australian Government can support state and territory governments with bushfire events of national importance is by developing and agreeing a national bushfire response and recovery plan through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), or even the current National Cabinet that has been set up in response to COVID-19. This plan could determine trigger points for when the Australian Government can step in to provide additional assistance, what this additional assistance looks like, and how these arrangements would then be coordinated between different levels of governments. Furthermore, we believe there are lessons from broader experiences that could help inform this approach, such as issues relating to national security, critical infrastructure and the current COVID-19 outbreak.
- We also believe there is considerable international disaster recovery expertise within Australia that provides transferable skills that could be utilised to support future surges in recovery and reconstruction efforts. For example, organisations such as [RedR Australia](#) (of which Consult Australia is a founding member) have extensive experience in risk reduction for communities affected by natural disasters and in training, supporting and providing aid workers around the world for various relief programs including the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2005 Pakistan earthquake. We believe this expertise could be used to help coordinate response efforts and to help upskill other resources such as new capabilities required within the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to reflect a changed role after the Black Summer bushfire events.

How Australia prepares for future national natural disasters

This part of our response relates to the new reality in Australia of the increasing risk of natural disasters such as bushfires. This higher risk will likely increase the frequency and severity of these natural disasters, and also create more events that have a nationwide impact.

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We therefore commend the Royal Commission for considering how Australia prepares for future natural disasters, and identify the below opportunities for improvement.

- Climate change impacts must be considered when determining what actions can be taken to prepare for future natural disasters. A changing climate is having a significant impact on Australia's environmental sustainability, with increasing temperatures and volatile weather events adversely affecting people, businesses, and the economy. As such, we believe the Royal Commission should consider how all levels of government, business, and the our communities can jointly act to transition to a net zero carbon economy and adopt policy positions that do not limit the solutions available to address sustainability. This imperative will also ensure future generations have the opportunity to enjoy economic prosperity, health, wellbeing, and a rich natural environment.
- We believe this Royal Commission should investigate how the built environment in bushfire-prone areas can adapt to higher risks. This could include considering if building and other related standards could be amended in these types of locations, and determining if more bushfire resilient infrastructure could be rolled out in these communities. The Royal Commission should also consider how governments can work with industry to develop an approach and a range of programmes focused on our infrastructure being more resilient to natural disasters. We believe this approach should be centered on the principles of adaption and mitigation.

Consult Australia thanks you for the opportunity to contribute to the Royal Commission. I invite you to contact me directly at nicola@consultaaustralia.com.au for more information or to discuss our input further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicola Grayson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Nicola Grayson
Chief Executive