



National Bushfire Recovery Agency

Bushfire Recovery News – Edition 4

From the National Bushfire Recovery Coordinator

A lot has happened in the past fortnight at the National Bushfire Recovery Agency.

Many of you are making good use of our private message function through Facebook Messenger. We've had around 530 conversations so far, including 120 in the past week. If you want to raise an issue or ask a question about the help available, click the Send Message button on our [Facebook page](#) to contact us directly.

It's great to see the clean-up program continuing despite COVID19 making it harder. I'm encouraged by the number of local jobs that are being created. It's a testament to what can be achieved in tough times.

The number of small businesses we've been able to help with the new \$10,000 grant is also growing rapidly. More than 16,500 businesses across NSW, QLD and VIC have received or been approved for the grant. The \$10,000 grant is now available in even more areas, with eligibility extended to additional Local Government Areas in [New South Wales](#) and [South Australia](#) in recent weeks. If you have lost revenue because of the bushfires and are located in one of the most severely affected areas, call your state hotline to find out more or have a look at bushfirerecovery.gov.au/small-business. It could be easier than you think.

We are also working with states and territories to make recovery grant and loan application processes easier, with less documentation required. We're seeing take up continue to grow, which I hope is a sign that this work has had a positive impact.

We continue to focus on helping every person affected by the Black Summer move forward, and there's no doubt COVID-19 has made that extra challenging. Thankfully as a country we have worked together to self-isolate and hopefully the end of some restrictions are not too far away. The COVIDSafe app is easy to use and completely voluntary. It makes it quicker to find and alert people who've been in close contact with someone with COVID-19, meaning better protection for all and a quicker return to normal for our bushfire recovery efforts.

As the world continues to change with the effects of COVID-19, we're focused on providing information that's clear, relevant and reaches people that need it. If you're comfortable filling in our [confidential survey](#), I would love your thoughts on how we can improve.

Andrew Colvin
National Bushfire Recovery Coordinator

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This fortnight



Koalas released back into wild

Our wildlife are as tough as we are. After healing from burns suffered in the fires, more than 20 koalas have been released back into their natural habitat by Port Macquarie Koala Hospital. Among them is four year old koala Anwen, who captured hearts after being admitted to the koala hospital's intensive care unit with severe burns to her arms.

[Find out more](#)

Are you interested in helping habitat recovery in your local area? Take a look at the [Wildlife and Habitat Bushfire Recovery grants round](#) open until 28 May 2020. This round is focused on plants and invertebrates.



Free webinars – Rural recovery

A free new 'webinar' series created by Australian charity Rural Aid starts this week. Every Tuesday morning from 5 May to 7 July, you can join online to connect with experts in rural rebuilding and sustainability.

The online sessions will connect rural communities across the country - even more relevant as people deal with social isolation, during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

To register to be part of the Community Builders Series, visit: ruralaid.org.au/towns/webinars/



What drives us

In the past 100 days, the National Bushfire Recovery Agency has been listening, learning, and helping people to start recovering from bushfires.

We paused to reflect on the impact this work has had on us, and the many things still to be done.

[Watch our video](#) and get to know some of our staff and what motivates us.

We want to get to know you too – send us a private message through Facebook to let us know what's needed for recovery in your area.

[Click the 'send message' button on our Facebook page](#)

Key facts and figures

Help delivered so far

Our work to deliver financial help to communities and businesses is continuing. An update on just some of the funding dispersed so far is below (as at 4 May), with the numbers rising daily.



How it happened



Dr Kevin Wang (middle) with two volunteers

Volunteers in Bermagui (NSW) – 31 December 2019

When Bega based doctor Kevin Wang woke to a neighbour knocking loudly on his Bermagui door, early in the morning of 31 December, he realised it was time to get his family out to the beach. As ash and debris fell on his doorstep he quickly gathered his things and took his family down to the Bermagui Surf Life Saving Club evacuation centre. He made his way through the crowd in the pitch black and smoke to see if the centre needed any help.

To his surprise there was only one other young GP (Dr Chris Darragh) and a handful of voluntary nurses at the centre, which was supported by local and regional Surf Life Saving volunteers (including those from Sydney and Pambula that happened to be stranded in Bermagui amid the annual George Bass Surfboat Marathon). A Pambula surf life saver volunteer said they thought it was fate that some teams had arrived early in Bermagui - which allowed them to resource the tiny club and its volunteer team.

It was truly remarkable. There was a feeling amongst volunteers that everyone else had been briefed and knew what was happening but in reality people had just come forward and were improvising - doing what they could to help. Holidaying and evacuee nurses from South East Regional Hospital and other towns had created their own roster to resource the first aid centre and assist.

Dr Wang and Dr Darragh established a triage between the Surf Club's first aid office and the Country Club evacuation point where thousands of evacuees sheltered from the smoke and fires.

"It wasn't too bad at first, but when the power and water stopped and the phone reception went, it became increasingly complicated to examine by torch light and communicate with paramedics," Dr Wang said.



One of the more unusual patients was seven year old canine cavoodle Ava - whose eye had been dislodged and was hanging out causing the dog and its owner's extreme distress. All roads were blocked off and the phone lines were down so it was impossible to get hold of a vet. Limited medical supplies meant anaesthetising and suturing patients was off the cards. Dr Wang and nurse Margie Briggs comforted the pooch and did their best to secure the eye so the family could make their way to the vet when the roads opened.

The community truly came together. One Cobargo couple who lost their beautiful shop stepped up to connect the first aid centre to a power generator and organise an ambulance to collect a severely injured farmer stranded at his home in Coolagolite. "It's amazing how this couple could be so selfless and positive in an incredibly stressful and distressing situation," said Dr Wang.

"I'm very grateful to them as the ability to see properly was integral to our examination of an elderly patient, who in the early hours of the morning was loaded into my car and transported to the first aid centre. We made a call that she needed hospitalisation, but with the phones being down and limited visibility Dr Chris had to make his way by foot and torch light to the paramedic's house to seek assistance. The ambos were truly amazing. They always provide incredible services but they really went above and beyond risking their own lives to take patients to the hospital despite the road to Bega being closed."

Local nurse Jeremiah Langford of Quaama, who had evacuated with his family, provided outstanding comfort and assistance to patients throughout the day and night, despite not knowing how his property and neighbours were faring in the tiny town neighbouring Cobargo. Immediately following his volunteer work, with very little rest and possibly no house to return to, he went straight to Bega Hospital to carry out his day job as an emergency nurse.

"I hope that this story illustrates that our community is strong and resilient - we pull together and support each other," said Dr Wang. "We will get through this and when we do we'll need you all to come back to the coast and support the local businesses and farmers to recreate this unique part of Australia."

Local workers key to clean-up



Class A contractor working on the safe clean up of a property in East Gippsland Shire.

With the fires and now COVID-19, work has been harder to come by in many bushfire affected areas.

When we designed the jointly funded clean-up program with the states, it was important that local workers would be used wherever possible.

The chance to play a hands on role in clearing debris safely has been embraced by businesses and workers across the fire zones.

The process is taking time, but state governments and their contractors are working hard to clear the rubble of homes and buildings quickly and safely.

If you haven't registered your property yet, it's not too late:

[Register for clean up in Victoria](#) or call **1800 560 760**

[Register for clean up in South Australia](#) or call **08 8204 2051**

[Register for clean up in New South Wales](#) or call **13 77 88**

Clean up in Victoria

In Victoria, the state government has contracted Grocon to demolish, remove and safely dispose of all buildings destroyed or damaged beyond repair by the 2019-20 bushfires. This includes removal of fencing, trees and vehicles where they impeded safe access to the property.

The service is provided at no cost to property owners, but you do need to [register](#) to get on the list.

In Victoria, 721 properties have been registered for clean-up and Grocon continues to progress with many work sites and inspections underway. More than 90 properties have already been cleared, with the aim of all work being completed by August 2020.

As all bushfire waste is classified under law as asbestos-contaminated, it meant that the early stages of the clean-up project were focused on safety for both workers and the locals.

More than half of the contractors engaged by Grocon to do the work come from the local area. Those businesses include plumbers, surveyors, arborists, electricians and other services and equipment.

- In the Corryong area, 22 of the 66 clean up workers are locals.
- In the Bairnsdale area, 78 of the 126 clean up workers are locals.
- In the Buchan area, 44 of the 69 clean up workers are locals.
- In Mallacoota, 22 of the 68 clean-up workers are local.
- On top of that, 17 of the 30 Grocon regional clean up staff are from the local area.

It's great to see locally led recovery in action. Thank you to homeowners for being patient while this important work progresses

Snapshot from the frontline



Our Deputy Coordinator in Grafton NSW meeting with business owners

Clarence and Richmond Valleys, New South Wales - March 2020

In mid-March, before the COVID-19 restrictions, a small team from the Agency visited the Clarence Valley and Richmond Valley regions of northern NSW.

The area was hit by numerous bushfires starting in August last year, after already suffering through drought conditions. Communities spent months on tenterhooks as the fire front threatened lives, homes, properties, production land and native habitat.

The team met with staff from the shire councils and locals affected by the many impacts of the fires. Whether talking to primary producers about stock and fencing or hearing about the strain the fires put on people's sense of wellbeing, it was clear the fires had a profound effect.

Small businesses in Grafton and Casino spoke candidly with Deputy Coordinator Major General Andrew Hocking, and the Grafton Chamber of Commerce presented a more detailed perspective on the cascading impacts to the region and the way businesses are leaning on each other to adapt to these difficult times.

Opportunities like this provide valuable insight into recovery and local initiatives which can be shared with other affected regions across state boundaries. Whether swapping good ideas or drawing solace from shared challenges, the more connected we can be through recovery the better.

ATO helps ease tax burden for fire-affected community

The ATO is committed to easing the burden during this difficult time by providing a short-term deferral for a number of lodgement and payment obligations. They recognise the bushfires still affect many individuals and businesses within the region and want to assist people to get back on track.

If you live in one of the identified impacted postcodes, and don't want to think about tax, the ATO has automatically deferred any lodgements or payments you have due. You, or your agent, don't need to apply for the deferral.

This includes automatically deferring the due date to lodge and pay money owed as a result of business activity statements, income tax, self-managed superannuation fund (SMSF), fringe benefits tax (FBT) and excise returns. Visit ato.gov.au/bushfires to check your due date for lodgment or payment.

If you're ready to lodge sooner, you don't have to wait until the deferred due date.

You may also be eligible for temporary cash flow support when you lodge your activity statements for March through to September 2020. This is a new measure supporting small and medium businesses and not-for-profit organisations that employ staff and have been affected by the economic downturn associated with COVID-19. Visit ato.gov.au/coronavirus for more information on tax or visit the [NBRA](#) to find out more about other business and financial support.

Contact us

How to subscribe

Do you know someone who wants to receive these updates? They can subscribe at bushfirerecovery.gov.au/news/subscribe You'll find previous editions of the newsletter at the link above.

Key contacts

If you need emergency assistance, please ring Triple Zero (000)

Click here for [key contacts in state and Australian governments](#)

Email us

contact@bushfirerecovery.gov.au

Message us

Click the 'Message' button on our [Facebook page](#) to send us a private message if you have a question or concern. Our Recovery Support Officers are online to help.

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