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## Information bulletin Australia: Bushfires

 International Federation  
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

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| <b>Information bulletin n° 4; Glide n° <a href="#">WF-2019-000183-AUS</a></b> | <b>Date of issue:</b> 5 February 2020                               |
| <b>Date of disaster:</b> From November 2019                                   | <b>Point of contact:</b> Simon Rickard, National Operations Manager |
| <b>Operation start date:</b> 7 November 2019                                  | <b>Expected timeframe:</b> Minimum 3 years                          |
| <b>Category of disaster:</b> Orange   |   |
| <b>Host National Society:</b> Australian Red Cross                            |   |
| <b>Number of people affected:</b> TBC   | <b>Number of people to be assisted:</b> TBC                         |
| <b>N° of National Societies currently involved in the operation:</b> N/A      |   |
| <b>N° of other partner organizations involved in the operation:</b> N/A       |   |

*This bulletin is being issued for information only and reflects the current situation and details available at this time. Australian Red Cross is extremely grateful for the huge outpouring of support from people within Australia and abroad. Australian Red Cross is accepting donations to the Red Cross Disaster Relief and Recovery Fund which helps our national emergency teams to do their work – including the bushfires and heatwaves we’re currently seeing and disasters yet to come. At this time, Australian Red Cross is not seeking other forms of assistance from our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners for the bushfire operation. To see how Australian Red Cross are putting these funds to work, see [here](#).*

[<click here for detailed contact information>](#)

## The situation

High temperatures and prolonged dry conditions have resulted in unprecedented bushfire activity across the states of New South Wales (NSW) since early November 2019, in Victoria (VIC), Western Australia (WA) and South Australia (SA) since early December 2019, and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in January 2020. At least 34 people have died as a result of the bushfires and the impact upon air quality is estimated to have affected millions. An estimated 5,900 residential and public structures have been destroyed. Loss of wildlife is estimated to have surpassed 1.5 billion losses, along with tens of thousands of livestock. Due to prevailing drought conditions over all affected states during 2019, agricultural and horticultural sectors will be impacted well into the long-term. Due to the changeable nature of this crisis, assessments are ongoing and all reported figures are expected to change as the situation evolves.



South Australia State Emergency Services Manager, Jai O’Toole with Kangaroo Island local in the wake of January’s fires. (Photo: ARC)

The intensity and size of bushfires in some areas has led to the creation of their own weather systems, generating pyrocumulonimbus clouds, trapping heat and generating strong wind and lightning strikes, in turn sparking further fires. High winds have also helped the bushfires to spread, with some fires 'jumping' over highways and other major containment lines. The pace at which the bushfires have spread and the subsequent heavy smoke have made it difficult for emergency services to access and evacuate some communities, at times forcing residents to flee to beaches and other water bodies to avoid impact and await rescue. Power, fuel, and food supplies have been severely interrupted to some communities and road closures have been common. This has resulted in some communities being isolated, or only accessible by air or sea (when smoke conditions allow). The bushfire and weather conditions have also severely impacted telecommunications across most affected areas. Smoke haze has also significantly worsened air quality across southern and eastern Australia, with some areas reaching 20 times above levels considered safe by the Australian Government, including in the major cities of Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne. The reduction in air quality is a major public health concern and the Australian Ministry of Health is warning of significant long-term health risks, particularly for vulnerable members of the population such as elderly, infants and those already managing serious health conditions. Mental health is also a significant concern as people face the stress posed by living through prolonged heatwave and bushfire events, the loss of friends and family, loss of livelihoods, property, pets and livestock, and for some, extended periods of displacement.

States of emergency and disaster in NSW and VIC (respectively) have been lifted. However, current forecasts anticipate that the existing bushfires will continue to burn at their current scale or higher, until at least March 2020. Though NSW and VIC have been the worst hit so far, extreme heat and drought conditions across Australia threatens a high likelihood of further bushfires in existing, and new areas over the coming months.

### Recent Developments (as at 5 February 2020)



Bushfires in Australia's capital, Canberra over the last weekend of January 2020. (Source: BBC)

Heatwaves in NSW and ACT re-escalated existing fires and gave rise to new ones, though human impacts have stayed relatively low. As at 4 February, there are 62 active fires in NSW and 8 in VIC. Not all current fires are under control and some are hundreds of thousands of hectares in size, therefore presenting immediate threats to surrounding areas and having a widespread impact on air quality. Drought conditions remain a significant concern with December 2019 rainfall the lowest ever on record and rainfall deficiencies expanding and intensifying drought across much of Australia (especially in the East). Of particular note, Canberra experienced its biggest threat through bushfires since 2003 when a fire started in the Orroral Valley in the Namadgi National Park. By the morning of 28 January, the fire had grown to 2,575 hectares (6,360 acres) and was approximately 40 kilometres from Canberra. Despite the threat posed, the fire's main damage was to the bush and wildlife of Namadgi National Park, the main impact on human life was the degrading of air quality.

## Red Cross action

The Australian Red Cross' role as auxiliary to government in national emergency response is primarily to provide psychosocial support, community outreach and in some states, evacuation centre management. This role applies across the disaster management continuum, including community preparedness and early warning messaging, emergency response and continues into long-term recovery. Based upon forecasts of Australia's hottest and driest summer on record, Australian Red Cross Emergency Services team (ARCES) have been preparing for heightened activity since September 2019. Accordingly, ARCES have been supporting communities across Australia through drought and extreme heat conditions over much of 2019, then shifting into emergency response mode when the bushfires first escalated in early November 2019.

The main ARCES Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) based out of Melbourne has been open since early December 2019 and from 3 January 2020 has been open 24/7. So far, ARCES have mobilised over 2,700 staff and volunteers from across Australia for the response operation. Though ARCES volunteers are still activated for response across the country, the current (relative) respite in bushfire activity will be used to prepare for further anticipated bushfire activity over the coming months.

So far, approximately 61,000 people have been supported by ARCES through the bushfire emergency response across the following areas:

- Community outreach.
- Psychosocial First Aid (PFA) provision and training.
- Relief coordination and distribution (food, water and hygiene items).
- Support to evacuation centres and services.
- Emergency cash grants (800 payments made as at 23 January 2020).
- Restoring Family Links (known as "Register. Find. Reunite" in Australia).
- Public messaging and tools for [bushfire and heatwave preparedness](#).

The emergency cash grants have now been increased to AUD 20,000 (approx. CHF 13,000) per grant and are available to people whose homes have been destroyed in the bushfires. Primary residence repair grants of AUD 5,000 (approx. CHF 3,200) have been made available, along with injury grants of AUD 7,500 (approx. CHF 4,900). ARC is also continuing to provide an AUD 20,000 (approx. CHF 13,000) bereavement grant for families of those lost during the bushfires. A longer-term financial support package is intended to replace the emergency grants as part of broader recovery programming (currently in assessment phase).

A significant amount of the areas affected by bushfire are home to First Nations communities, including Gunaai/Kurnai, Bidjara and Yorta Yorta (all in Victoria). These communities have an extremely strong connection to the land and wildlife, with history stretching back over 60,000 years. First Nations Communities have native title across some of the bushfire affected areas, which involves the management of the natural environment and wildlife. Australian Red Cross are coordinating with First Nations communities as an integral part of the overall bushfire response and working to ensure they are supported. First Nations community leaders will also be key participants in our community-led recovery programming.

The overall coordination of the bushfire response and recovery is managed by each state's governmental disaster management department, the main actors being the State Fire Services, state police and government relief agencies. The Australian Army, Navy and Air Force (defence forces) have also been mobilised to provide support and a significant number of wildlife rescue organisations are also in action. ARCES is coordinating with all bushfire response and recovery actors, including embedding liaison officers in state government control centres.

### Recovery Planning

ARC have commenced assessments for psychosocial recovery programming in a number of bushfire affected communities across the country. A National Bushfire Recovery Framework is currently being developed, based upon the Australian National Disaster Recovery Principles, and Psychosocial Support Principles. Community outreach activities have also stepped up with volunteers undertaking door to door and telephone information dissemination and PSS activities. Volunteers are also doing face to face support for emergency grant applications where needed.

The ARC bushfire operation will cover three main phases, the current early recovery phase (phase one) will comprise support to evacuation centres, psychosocial outreach, Register. Find. Reunite, cash grants and public information. Phase two will see the completion of the community needs assessment in parallel to continuing early recovery activities. Each state and territory will then use the assessment data to develop long-term recovery programs (phase three), based upon long term psychosocial recovery needs as advised by the communities in their respective contexts. These activities will be grouped either as direct service delivery, capacity and capability provision, and advocacy. ARC is in the process of recruiting a number of dedicated recovery roles across the states affected and at the national office in Melbourne.

Red Cross' recovery program will be for a minimum of three years, and be across South Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria. As we are only halfway through the fire season, there is potential for this programme to expand in scope.



State Government, local municipality, police and fire authority staff and ARCES volunteers at the Mallacoota relief centre (*Photo: ARC*)

The following table summarises damage and ARCES activities by state as at 5 February 2020:

| State           | Current areas of ARC activities  | Area of damage (hectares) | Volunteers activated <sup>1</sup> | Register. Find. Reunite.Reach                                       | PFA provided (per person) |
|-----------------|--|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| <b>NSW +ACT</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bega (community outreach, PFA + recovery centre support.)</li> <li>Ulladulla (community outreach, PFA + recovery centre support).</li> <li>Bateman's Bay (community outreach, PFA + recovery centre support).</li> <li>Sydney (EOC).</li> <li>Multiple mobile recovery sites across local government areas in Bega Batemans Bay, Balmoral Village, Snowy Valley, Lithgow, Hawkesbury and Snowy Mountains</li> </ul> | 12.8 million              | 770                               | 23,451 people registered, 4,592 enquiries and 366 confirmed matches | Data not available        |
| <b>VIC</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mallacoota (PFA + recovery centre support).</li> <li>Corryong (PFA + recovery centre support).</li> <li>Melbourne (National Coord. Centre).</li> </ul>  | 1.4 million               | 1,440                             | 29,873 people registered 762 enquiries and 176 matches confirmed    | 15,900                    |
| <b>SA</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kangaroo Island (community outreach, PFA + recovery centre support).</li> </ul>   | 490,000                   | 500                               | 8,369 registrations, 69 enquiries and 13 confirmed matches          | 1,200                     |

<sup>1</sup> Since start of operation

| State        | Current areas of ARC activities   | Area of damage (hectares) | Volunteers activated <sup>1</sup> | Register. Find. Reunite.Reach  | PFA provided (per person) |
|--------------|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
|              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lobethal (community outreach + recovery centre support).</li> <li>Adelaide (EOC).</li> </ul>                             |                           |                                   |  |                           |
| WA           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seatrees and Breakwater estates (community outreach).</li> <li>Yanchep-Two Ricks-Gingin (community outreach).</li> </ul> | 2.2 million               | Data not available                | 989 registrations and 32 enquiries   | Data not available        |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>Seven recovery centres currently supported, three coordination centres and multiple mobile sites.</b>  | <b>16.9 million</b>       | <b>2,710</b>                      | <b>62,682 people registered, 5,455 enquiries and 555 confirmed matches</b> | <b>17,100</b>             |

The IFRC Country Cluster Support Team in Suva and the IFRC Asia-Pacific Regional Office in Kuala Lumpur have offered support to Australian Red Cross should they need it and are working to direct donor enquiries and share information on the bushfire response to the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement.



[Click here](#)

1. Australian Red Cross [website](#)
2. Click [here](#) to return to the title page

## Contact information

For further information specifically related to this operation please contact:

**Australian Red Cross:**

**Simon Rickard, National Operations Manager**

**Email: [srickard@redcross.org.au](mailto:srickard@redcross.org.au)**

**Mobile: +61 438 374 150**

**For National Societies enquiring about donating funds, please contact:**

**Michael Annear, Director, International Programs**

**Email: [mannear@redcross.org.au](mailto:mannear@redcross.org.au)**

**For media enquiries please contact:**

**Kate Moore, Emergency Services Campaigns Manager**

**Email: [kmoore@redcross.org.au](mailto:kmoore@redcross.org.au)**

**Mobile: +61 407 150 771**

## How we work

All IFRC assistance seeks to adhere to the [Code of Conduct](#) for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief and the [Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response \(Sphere\)](#) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable. The IFRC's vision is to inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies, with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.

The IFRC's work is guided by Strategy 2020 which puts forward three strategic aims:



**Save lives,**  
protect livelihoods,  
and strengthen recovery  
from disaster and crises.



Enable **healthy**  
and **safe** living.



Promote **social inclusion**  
and a culture of  
**non-violence** and **peace.**