

# Australian Bushfires Report

the power of humanity



1 January – 15 April 2020



Photo: Australian Red Cross/Aysha Leo

This report is an account of how Australian Red Cross responded to the Black Summer bushfires and how we are using the funds entrusted to us to help those affected.

This report covers the period 1 Jan – 15 Apr 2020. We continue to provide financial assistance and other support to communities affected by all bushfires since July 2019.

## \$200m DONATED

Figures current at 15 April 2020

3 months into our grants and recovery program

**\$73m**



**\$5m**

enabled us to help **27,500 people** during the bushfires this year



**\$57m**

distributed in emergency, repair, injury & bereavement grants



**\$11m**

distributed in rebuild grants so far

How we are using the rest of the funds

**\$127m**



**\$22m**

in grants for those who haven't yet applied



**\$59m**

to rebuild homes



**\$18m**

to support community recovery over the next three years



**\$28m**

for further unmet needs in bushfire-affected communities

At a cost so far of less than 4¢ in the dollar for each dollar donated

## Prior to this reporting period

The bushfire season started early, in September 2019. We acknowledge the terrible events and incredible efforts of our teams throughout the year.

In September, fires had significant impact on communities in New South Wales and Queensland. Fires continued to burn in both states, and by November, South Australia experienced its first major fire of the season, while a sleeper fire escalated in East Gippsland in Victoria. In December, fires continued to burn down much of the eastern seaboard, as well as major fires in South Australia and Western Australia. By the end of December, active bushfires were burning in five states.

## From January to March...



*We also responded to bushfires prior to 1 January 2020, not covered in this reporting period.*

## Critical aspects of our response

### Central and state-level coordination

Red Cross' National Coordination Centre worked with state-based incident management teams to deploy personnel based on needs in the field. These included GIS mapping officers, field psychologists and other vital support roles.

### Coordinating well with federal, state and local authorities to meet humanitarian needs

- In Victoria, Red Cross teams accompanied the Australian Defence Force as they evacuated people from Mallacoota and returned them home. Our Register.Find.Reunite (RFR) service became a point of truth to learn the whereabouts of people who fled the fires and follow up with them.
- In South Australia, we collaborated with SA Housing Authority, Disaster Recovery Ministries and community stakeholders to support people at relief and recovery

centres, provide psychological first aid, provide the RFR service and offer training to local government and community staff.

- In New South Wales, our volunteers worked with government agencies on community outreach and recovery, for the fires that continued to burn during the period as well as those from months before.

### Trained volunteers living locally in Gippsland

When communities in Gippsland were completely cut off by fire, Red Cross volunteers living in those communities immediately mobilised to help. They provided psychological first aid, organised food from local venues for people who had to leave their homes, and informed external relief efforts.

### Walking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

First Nations communities endured deep and unique losses from the fires – including sacred places, totems and songlines. They also face greater challenges accessing relief and recovery assistance. We have been coordinating with many communities as an integral part of our response and continue to walk with and learn from them on their journey of recovery.

## Our people



*Reporting period does not include bushfires prior to 1 January 2020.*

## Protecting wellbeing and managing fatigue

Maintaining workforce wellbeing was critical for such a sustained response. As the fires continued, we brought in teams from different regions and states to relieve those on the ground.

Independent wellbeing checks were provided by phone to people who finished their deployment. These calls were made by volunteers in Tasmania and Western Australia. We also enlisted the support of the Australian Psychological Society, whose members provided free debriefs to volunteers and staff to maintain their mental wellbeing.

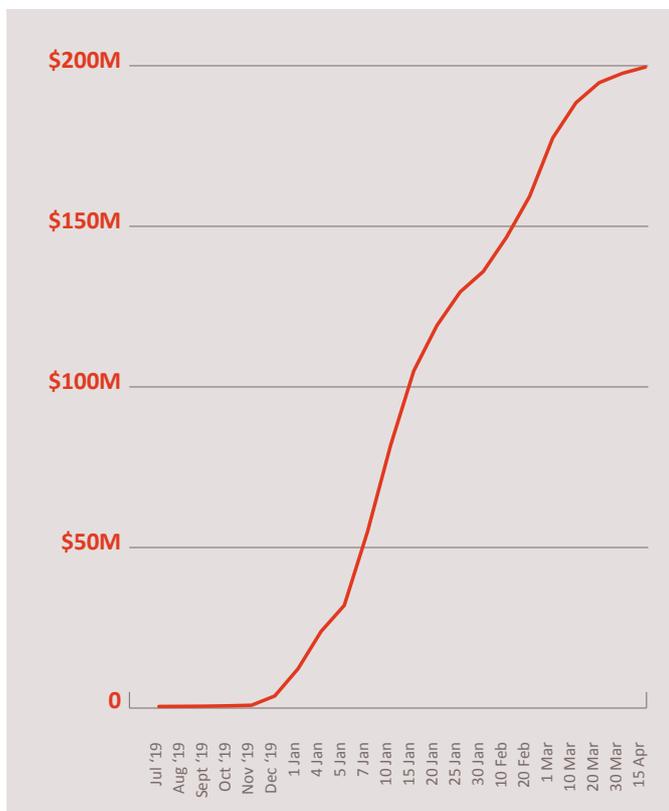
In addition to the teams in the field, those carrying out vital backroom logistics and administrative functions were stretched to capacity. Wellbeing and fatigue management was just as important for these volunteers and staff.

## The public response

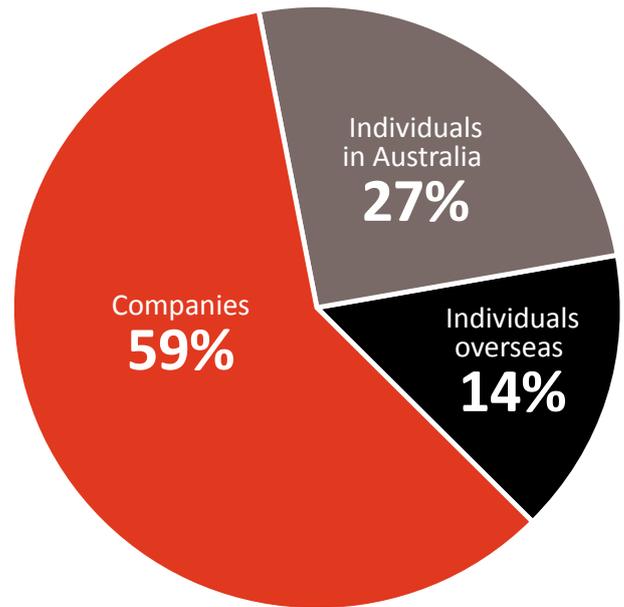
At 1 January 2020, we had \$8m in the Disaster Relief and Recovery fund. People donated more than \$60m in the 10 days afterward, and donations came in by the millions each day until February.

More than 700 companies donated to the fund, and we received tremendous pro-bono support from Accenture, Deloitte, Microsoft, Ernst and Young, Jaguar Land Rover, King & Wood Mallesons, National Australia Bank, KPMG, Commonwealth Bank of Australia, IAG, Globus and the Surveying and Spatial Sciences Institute; together with Oxfam, CARE Australia, World Vision, British Red Cross and New Zealand Red Cross and others in the not-for-profit sector.

### Donations to Disaster Relief and Recovery fund from 1 July 2019 to 15 April 2020



## Who donated?



## Managing a rapid rise in donations

- **We adjusted grant amounts as funds grew.** Our emergency grant started at \$2,000 per household and rose three times to eventually reach \$20,000 per household. As funds grew, we continued to provide new grants.
- **We had to be consistent about how funds could be used.** We are committed to using funds for the purpose they were collected. As a public benevolent institution, we are bound to provide assistance to people facing hardship, in line with our core purpose. Red Cross does not, for example, use donations to the Disaster Relief and Recovery fund to help animals, or cover damage to investment properties and holiday homes, or – as we have been asked recently – redirect funds to a COVID-19 response.
- **We needed to carefully manage international contributions.** Many donations were driven by high-profile individuals, from the Prince of Wales to Chris Hemsworth. We partnered with several Red Cross and Red Crescent societies to manage donations from their countries. To comply with Australian sanction laws, we blocked donations from countries sanctioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

## How we are using donated funds



Total funds raised since July 2019: **\$200 million**

At 15 April 2020

### FUND ALLOCATIONS

#### On-the-ground disaster services

 **\$5m** for 24/7 support including evacuations, relief centres and outreach services (FY19/20 only)

#### Immediate assistance grants

 **\$54m** to support people whose homes were destroyed

 **\$20m** to help homeowners make urgent repairs

 **\$1.5m** for bereavement payments

 **\$3.5m** to support people hospitalised for injuries as a result of the fires

#### Mid-to-long-term support

 **\$70m** to help people facing financial hardship to rebuild their destroyed homes

 **\$18m** to support community recovery for three years or more

 **\$28m** for further unmet needs in bushfire-affected communities

 **\$68m** has been distributed to bushfire-affected people at 15 April.

#### Admin support costs

The necessary costs of our work (including fundraising costs, data security, a dedicated grant payments team, presence in local communities, fraud prevention, legal compliance, field outreach, communications and remote working systems) have so far been around \$6m or less than 4¢ in the dollar for each dollar donated.

Most of our support costs are incurred up front to meet immediate needs rapidly.



Photo: Australian Red Cross/Dilini Pereira

#### Grant payments

 **3,524 people** have received a Red Cross bushfire grant

 **\$68m** has been paid to affected people

 **2,576** emergency grants for destroyed homes

 **664** primary residence repair grants

 **282** injury grants

 **35** bereavement payments

**Grants are still open to people affected by any bushfire from 1 July 2019.**



**We needed to get much-needed financial assistance to people as simply and quickly as possible, while preventing fraud.**

- 1 Balance 'making it easy' with due diligence**

Records of fire damage – from all agencies and all states – are still being completed. Many people who lost homes also lost the documents they needed to verify their claims. And we received hundreds of carefully falsified applications.

To be confident in paying each grant, we needed to:

  - discuss many applicants' individual circumstances
  - compare the address provided against available rapid damage assessments
  - if these were not available, use fire scar data and aerial imagery
  - conduct visual inspections when no other validation was available

- 2 Reaching people in remote areas**

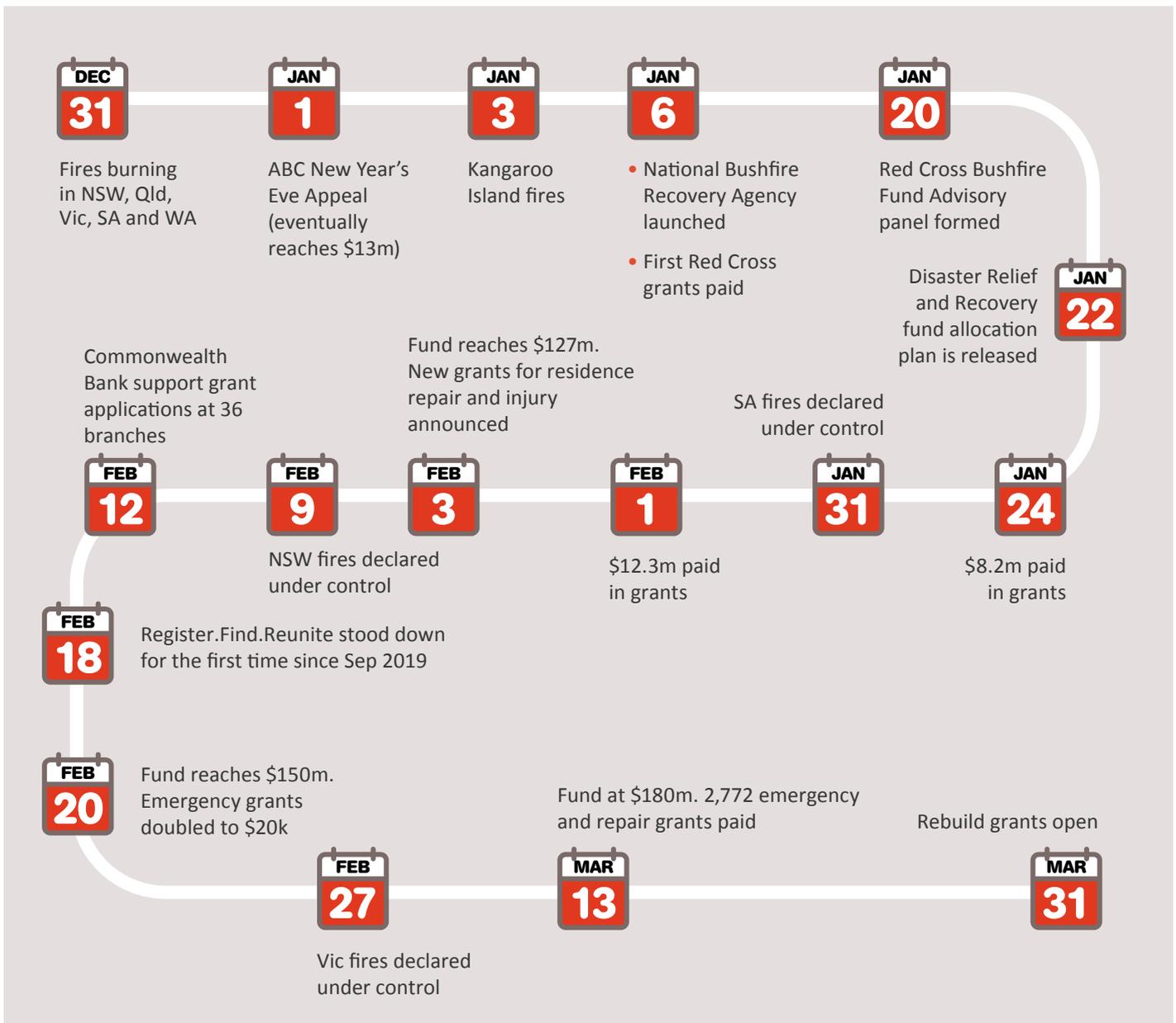
Not everyone whose home was destroyed or structurally damaged has yet applied for a grant. For as long as we could before COVID-19 restrictions, our volunteers travelled to remote or isolated communities. We also worked with the Commonwealth Bank to enable people to apply in person at 36 branches.
- 3 Go at the pace people need.**

This meant allocating funds to meet immediate financial hardship, rebuilding assistance when homeowners are ready, and community recovery.
- 4 Adapt to COVID-19 restrictions**

We needed to shift grant payment options to work-from-home arrangements, and go from home and community visits to phone and online outreach.

Photo: Australian Red Cross/Rodney Dekker

## Key dates in 2020



*During this time we continued to support and provide financial assistance to people who had been impacted by fires in 2019.*

### Creating a Bushfire Fund Advisory Panel

An independent panel of advisers is helping us make decisions on how best to use funds. Their professional and personal experience of disaster recovery, combined with insights from our grants and field teams, helped us develop and set criteria for each grant.

### Applying lessons learnt from Black Saturday fires

We learnt from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires that post-traumatic stress and other mental health issues can persist for years after a disaster; and that strong community connections are a vital protective factor.

We also know that many people were not ready to start rebuilding until one to four years afterwards. Informed by researchers, our own work and the lived experience of a Black Saturday survivor on our Bushfire Advisory Panel, we made two significant investments in mid-to-long-term recovery. The first is \$70 million in rebuilding assistance, from which the first grants are now being paid. The second is an \$18 million community recovery program, which we have commenced in partnership with community leaders and local service providers in each bushfire-affected community.



Photo: Australian Red Cross/Rodney Decker

## Our focus now and in the coming years

### Supporting more people to apply for immediate assistance

Not everyone whose home was destroyed or damaged has yet come forward for a grant. While community outreach is still restricted due to COVID-19, we are reaching out online and through community networks to encourage people to apply for the help they are entitled to.

### Managing the combined impact of COVID-19 and bushfires

The COVID-19 pandemic is a double burden on communities recovering from the bushfires. Lockdown measures are affecting businesses and livelihoods, as well as the ability of communities to come together to support each other at this critical time. This presents further risk to the mental health and wellbeing of many people. Red Cross has taken steps to ensure we continue to provide support services remotely, including the ongoing provision of financial assistance and mental health and wellbeing checks. We are also supporting

efforts for community meetings to continue online and to ensure people have a say in the rebuilding of their communities.

### Implementing a tailored community recovery program

Each community's recovery will look different. Community recovery officers are working with each community and its service providers to identify their needs and design a program that will run for three years or more. First Nations community leaders are key participants in this program.

### Rebuilding when people are ready

Even without the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, it typically takes between one and four years for people who have lost homes to rebuild. Our \$70 million rebuilding program has been launched to support those facing financial hardship when they are ready to rebuild their homes, and will continue until funds are fully distributed.

*"Red Cross, simply can't thank you enough! We had already replaced our pump out of our own pockets and I was stressing how I'd go about affording a new battery bank, let alone repair the septic tank as well. Now, thanks to this help, we can completely replace our batteries with an entirely new bank and still have enough to address our septic damage issue! Totally saved the day and removed a MOUNTAIN of pressure and stress off our shoulders! This means sooooo much! Truly, heartfelt thanks to everyone involved."*

*"I just wanted to send my heartfelt 'thank-you' to the Red Cross for assisting me with the emergency bushfire relief grants – these monies will go a long way in helping me to rebuild my life. It is wonderful to know that the Australian people care and that organisations like yours step up in times of crisis to pull the strings to coordinate the huge recovery and support effort."*

*"I filled out the form, which was really easy... and then we got the first \$5,000 and then a couple of days later we got another message saying 'we've upped it to \$10,000...I was just so grateful, it made a really big difference.'"*

*"They talked me through it and helped me with it and I applied then and there. I got it a couple of weeks after I applied, it was amazing."*

*"Without the injury grant I couldn't possibly have continued on with the treatment. I couldn't have afforded it. The relief that the Red Cross injury grant was life changing for me."*

*"Oh you are life savers, I've had such bad run just about to give up on everything. I rang back to get the bad news I was assuming. But this has turned my horrible few months around. Thank you so much for all your help and understanding!"*

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**Australian Red Cross**  
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April 2020

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