



Darren Chester

Federal Member for Gippsland

February 17, 2022

Senator the Hon Bridget McKenzie
Minister for Emergency Management & National Recovery and Resilience
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister

I am writing on behalf of the Sarsfield, Wairewa and Ensay communities regarding projects deemed ineligible under the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery grants program.

Firstly, I am appreciative of efforts to increase funding under this program after the original notional allocation to East Gippsland caused significant angst in my region. Despite the increased funding, I have already been contacted by several local community leaders who are frustrated and angry with the selection of successful projects.

While there are many excellent projects on the list of successful applicants, there is enormous disappointment with the final outcome. The 'Canberra knows best' centralised model of decision-making is fundamentally flawed and disrespects my community and everything we have been through.

Attached for your information is a copy of correspondence from the Sarsfield Recreation Reserve, Ensay Recreation Reserve, and a Hansard extract from February 16 where I highlighted ongoing concerns with the lack of engagement with my office.

At no stage during this process has anyone spoken to me from the Federal Government regarding strategic regional priorities for bushfire recovery funding.

Notwithstanding the fact that this situation could've been avoided if the NRRA consulted with me at any stage regarding the application process, the current situation appears to be an unintended consequence of excessive and heavy-handed bureaucracy within the Grants Hub.

To rule community not-for-profit groups ineligible to receive funding for a grant because they happen to manage a parcel of land which is owned by the State Government demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of regional communities. It also reeks of a lack of emotional intelligence and a blind adherence to bureaucracy at the expense of common sense to exclude projects from further consideration without bothering to check with the hard working volunteer groups, which were the project proponents.

In the Sarsfield example, the recreation reserve is the only parcel of public land available for community use and it is maintained by a volunteer committee of management which is forced to fundraise and seek grants from local and state programs on an annual basis.

To exclude this group from receiving funding, in a region which suffered major damage during the Black Summer bushfires, demonstrates an appalling lack of judgement by the assessment team.

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At no point during the application process were the volunteers advised their project was ineligible and they harboured false hope for months as the bureaucrats delayed consideration of the applications. So much for a community-led recovery when one of the most bushfire-impacted and traumatised communities is excluded from receiving any funding.

In Ensay, the committee notes it receives no State Government support and feels 'dudged' by the use of an obscure technicality to rule the application ineligible.

In the Wairewa example, the community-led committee was seeking to establish a picnic area alongside the East Gippsland Rail Trail which has previously received Federal Government funding for much-needed upgrades. The rail trail is a State Government-owned asset with a volunteer committee of management.

In essence, one arm of the Federal Government has no qualms supporting projects on State Government assets, while the other arm says no, without any explanation or consideration of the impact on a traumatised community.

For the record, I am aware of other projects that were successful which will be undertaken on State Government-owned land by East Gippsland Shire Council. It is bizarre that the ABN status of the proponent is considered more important than the actual project which the community was trying to deliver.

The double standards and needless bureaucracy has left a bitter taste in the mouths of East Gippslanders who see the long list of successful projects includes applications from areas with no direct fire damage. Again, there was no consultation with my office on the highest strategic priorities for bushfire recovery in East Gippsland.

I have just attended a meeting with representatives of NRRRA whose defence that the eligibility criteria was clearly indicated in the guidelines is a further insult to my community. To suggest that it was somehow the community groups' collective fault to not check the ABN status is ridiculous.

To quote from the grant website:

"You are not eligible if you are a Commonwealth or State government agency or body (including government business enterprises) except entities referred to in Section 5.1 of the grant opportunity guidelines."

Why would any not-for-profit community group believe it would be regarded as a 'Commonwealth or State Government agency or body'?

I am seeking an urgent reconsideration of the projects deemed ineligible and an assessment of the applications against the same criteria as other applicants. If the projects are deemed worthy of support I am willing to negotiate within the existing funding window allocated to East Gippsland to accommodate these projects.

There are projects on the successful list that could be delivered in stages with a lesser amount of funding, or could have attracted funding from existing government programs. These community groups have no other avenue to secure significant funding of this nature.

If that is not possible, I urge the Minister to intervene immediately and have the projects assessed for consideration of funding in the final round of local economic recovery program.

Again, if the projects are deemed worthy of support the Commonwealth should allocate its share of funding to these projects as an act of good faith with my community.

Given the unmet demand, the Commonwealth should also consider increasing the funding envelop and seeking a matching contribution from the Victorian State Government.

I will be seeking other avenues of funding support from local, state and federal sources for projects that were deemed eligible, but considered uncompetitive in this round. I formally request a full list of the unsuccessful public projects in my electorate and a summary explanation as to why they were deemed unworthy of support.

Again, I appreciate the efforts of your team to achieve a positive outcome for my community but emphasise this process has re-traumatised people who are already struggling with the long-term recovery from this devastating event.

The centralised model of evaluating grant programs, particularly in the aftermath of a natural disaster is fundamentally flawed and should never be used again by the Federal Government. We have Regional Development Australia bodies in place, along with Local Government Authorities and local MPs who are much better placed to advise the Minister on regional priorities.

I would be happy to discuss this matter further with your office at your convenience and await your reply as a matter of urgency.

Kind regards



DARREN CHESTER



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Hansard

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CORRECTIONS

This is a **PROOF ISSUE**. Members may suggest corrections to their own speeches within 15 non-sitting days by contacting the Hansard office.

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PROOF

HANSARD EXTRACT, FEBRUARY 16, 2022

Of course, in any of these types of programs, not every applicant is successful. The fundamental flaw in a program like this is that local MPs very often get absolutely no say in helping to establish some of the priorities. In this case, in my region, some of the most impacted little townships of Buchan, Sarsfield and Wairewa all missed out in their applications, and my challenge now as a local member is to try and work constructively with those community groups, to work with the minister's office, and to work with local and state government authorities to try and find ways to secure funding for their projects. Have no doubt that I won't be giving up on those communities, and I will be working to secure the funding they need to deliver the services the community expects after going through so much hardship. So the battle will continue in that regard.

Deputy Speaker Rick Wilson, I just want to reflect on the recovery process for a moment. You, yourself, have been through bushfires in recent times. Right through the recovery process, the lack of respect for local knowledge held by experienced MPs who have been through fires and floods and natural disasters in the past is a real problem for us in this nation. I fear the role of a local MP in these situations is undervalued. We have a bureaucratic approach, where both state and federal bureaucrats seem to think they know better than the people who've lived through these experiences with their communities in the past. I will be challenging NRRA and Bushfire Recovery Victoria to, in the future, demonstrate a greater understanding of the networks that local MPs often establish over a very long period of time and the appreciation they have of their communities and the challenges they will face in the recovery process. It bothers me enormously that every one of my concerns that I raised with the agencies in the immediate aftermath of the fires have come to fruition because we didn't take the action that could have been taken at an earlier time. We have to look at these issues and understand that there are people who have had direct life experience in the community or in MPs' offices who could be a great asset during the recovery process.

One of the things I will point out in relation to the issues for prevention, recovery and resilience in the face of tragedies like the Black Summer bushfires is that we all know in this country that we are going to have more fires. To have wildfire in Australia, you need three things. You need to have hot, windy days; you need a point of ignition; and you need fuel. This is not rocket science. We know that, every summer in Australia, we are going to have hot, windy days. We know that, every summer in Australia, we are going to have a point of ignition. It could be a lightning strike, an idiot with a match or just an accident. The only thing we can really have an impact on as humans is the fuel load. We have to do more, in partnership with our state government entities, to reduce the fuel load. Hazard reduction is failing miserably in this country and in the state of Victoria. We have to learn from the traditional owners of the land. Indigenous people had firestick technology they applied through thousands of years, and we ignore their learnings, their lessons, at our own peril. Hazard reduction is one thing we should be working much more constructively with the state governments to achieve if we are going to prevent or reduce the impact of these fires. If we had been doing the hazard reduction work, the damage to my community would have been significantly less.

What we saw during the Black Summer bushfires was that every fire started on public land, every fire was a natural lightning strike, and the damage was done on the public land-private land interface. That's where people lost their homes, lost their fences, lost their stock. We need to be working to secure critical asset protection through fuel reduction,

mulching and removal of fuel from around the townships to make sure that people are protected in these dangerous conditions.

There is only one thing worse than three-word slogans, and that's four-word slogans: more boots, less suits. We need more boots and less suits—more boots on the ground doing the practical environmental work and less suits in the city making excuses for why things can't be done. So I call on the state government to work in a constructive way with my community and with the federal government to ensure that we are doing the preventative work on natural resource management right throughout the state, not just in response to a disaster but well ahead of the fire season—things like slashing roadsides.

The Princes Highway was closed for more than a month. That's simply not good enough in 2020. It was closed because there was too much vegetation on the roadside. The community was ecstatic after the event when the crews went through and actually cleared 30 metres on both sides. It makes the road safer, but it also improves lines of sight so they can see oncoming vehicles, and it reduces the chance of hitting things like kangaroos, wallabies and wombats, as well. So maintaining the roadsides in a safe manner and mulching the vegetation along the roadsides is something that my community is keen to pursue. We are the custodians of a vast natural estate in Gippsland, but we have very few staff on the ground, in agencies like Parks Victoria, DELWP and Regional Roads Victoria, to actually do that maintenance work in our communities. It's a huge job opportunity, for those of us who live in those rural and regional communities, to have trained staff in the area, doing that great work on our behalf.

While I'm talking about the resilience of the road network, I have to reflect on those communities which have one road in and one road out. It is incumbent upon us at the federal level, and also at the state level, to support those communities with critical asset protection so they can be safe in times of natural disaster. People are going to visit those towns. People live in those towns. We have to maintain safe access for them in times of natural disaster. I give credit to the state government during the last bushfire period, the Black Summer bushfires. The warnings that were issued in partnership with the ABC, as the emergency services broadcaster, were very clear and encouraged people to get out of those communities well ahead of the danger period. But we need to do more work in terms of critical asset protection, prevention, recovery and resilience work.

While I have the opportunity, can I also extend my community's incredible thanks to the Australian Defence Force for the role they played during those bushfires. Having the Army, Navy and Air Force working in partnership with the civilian agencies was something that I have never seen before in my community. But what I learnt from that is that the civilian agencies really don't have a great understanding of the capability of the Australian Defence Force. How the Bushmasters can access areas that the Toyota LandCruisers can't came as a bit of a surprise to some of the civilian agencies. So I think more training between civilian and defence agencies is important and something we should aim to do on a regular basis throughout our region.

Finally, I just want to thank Gippslanders for the way they've shown extraordinary resilience and stuck together in what has been a long recovery process. I'm proud to represent that community in this place, and I recognise there's still a lot of work to be done in terms of the recovery from the bushfires. The \$30-odd million we announced the other day will be a great help, but it won't solve all our problems. We need to keep working together. You won't hear me in this place talking Australians down or talking Gippslanders down. We have to right now as a nation, as a parliament, show leadership, be as optimistic and as relentlessly positive as we possibly can, unite wherever possible and, please, seek consensus wherever we can, not division.