



Senator Katy Gallagher  
Office SG.90  
Australian Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

12 May 2020

Dear Senator Gallagher

**Impact of COVID-19 on Bushfire Affected Communities**

Thank you for your ongoing stewardship of the Select Committee on COVID-19 ('the Committee').

We note the Committee was established to inquire into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and any related matters. We believe that specific consideration needs to be given to the effectiveness of Government responses to COVID-19 in bushfire affected regions where individuals, businesses and communities at large are highly vulnerable to the public health and economic consequences of the pandemic.

We therefore write to request the Committee schedule public hearings to investigate the specific nature of the Government's economic response to COVID-19 in bushfire affected communities, including the administration of bushfire-related payments and grants. We propose calling witnesses from the National Bushfire Recovery Agency ('NBRA') and associated departments and agencies at the state and territory levels – particularly in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Queensland – who work shoulder-to-shoulder with the NBRA to administer relief on the ground.

We further encourage the Committee to call other witnesses who can paint a detailed picture of the situation in bushfire affected communities under COVID-19 including the Local Government Association, the Business Council of Australia, the National Mental Health Commission, Rural Finance Victoria, and the Minderoo Foundation, for example.

Following the summer that was, our communities face serious exponential public health, economic and social deterioration if appropriate levels of financial and other support are not accelerated and deployed. Local tourism industries in Indi and Mayo alike, for example, were decimated by the summer bushfires, only then to be forced into hibernation again under the current lockdown measures. Primary producers in both of our electorates including vineyards, orchards and livestock have also incurred unprecedented losses and will not survive without appropriate and efficient grant administration and co-operation between the NBRA and other agencies across all levels of government responding to COVID-19 in these communities.



We note with concern that both our offices have received reports from constituents and community stakeholders alike that individuals, businesses and primary producers may not be receiving bushfire recovery funds in a timely manner and that grant administration has not fully taken into consideration the compounding impact of COVID-19 in these communities. We are now mid-May, almost six months after the announcement of these grants, and there are still questions with respect to the development and administration of grant guidelines, the timely distribution of funds upon application and the role of NBRA in the rectification of these concerns in a timely manner.

The most recent data available on Indi, for example, indicates over 25% of applications for the Primary Producer Grants, Concessional Loans, \$10k Small Business Support Grants and \$50k Small Business Grants have yet to be reviewed or approved. Despite ongoing advocacy, most LGAs in Indi are still not even eligible for Small Business Support Grants. Even before COVID-19, the timely availability of this financial assistance was the deciding factor for businesses and primary producers who faced bankruptcy and closure as a result of the fires. The situation now is much more critical.

As for the electorate of Mayo, there is no specific information available about the administration of funds in the region – only data that is South Australia wide.

We understand that the response to COVID-19 is a whole-of-government one and that for this reason the Committee has called almost all major Government departments and agencies to provide evidence during this irregular Parliamentary schedule. We note, in particular, the witnesses from Services Australia and the Department of Social Services who provided fragment pieces of information about how their agencies are responding to COVID-19 in bushfire affected communities.

With respect, we believe this level of attention is insufficient given the dire situation in which bushfire affected communities find themselves, and the high-profile commitments from the Government just prior to the pandemic to work with these communities to rebuild and recover.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Helen Haines'.

**Helen Haines MP**  
Federal Member for Indi

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Rebekha Sharkie'.

**Rebekha Sharkie MP**  
Federal Member for Mayo