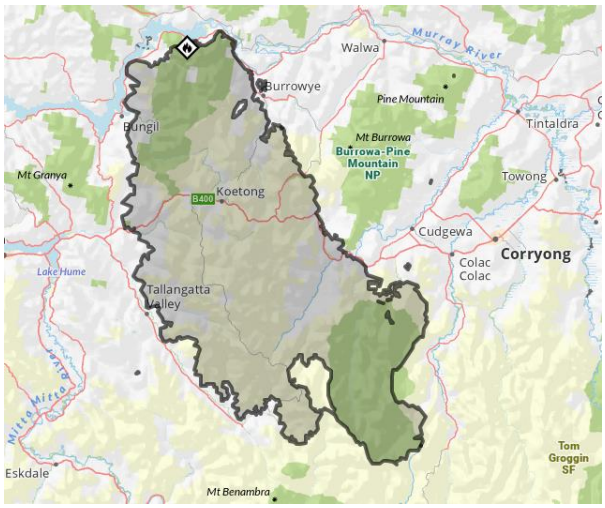
Helen Haines MP

Bushfire recovery and resilience in Indi

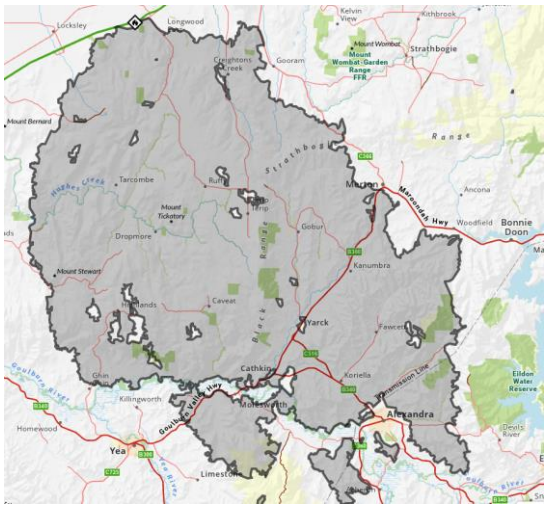
What Indi needs from Canberra after the 2026 bushfires

In January 2026, two fires known as the Longwood Fire and the Walwa River Road Fire destroyed approximately 300 homes (75 per cent of Victoria's total), thousands of sheds and outbuildings, and burned more than 250,000 hectares, with disproportionate impacts on agricultural producers.

Walwa River Road Fire



Longwood Fire



Communities responded with extraordinary local effort, and I have witnessed inspiring resilience as I've visited fire-affected communities. However, our resilience is not limitless. For many communities, this is the second or third catastrophic disaster in just a few years. What were once-in-a-century events are now happening once-in-a-decade, or even more often.

As the Independent Federal Member for Indi, I have listened to and worked with my community to compile this advocacy document outlining our asks of Canberra after the 2026 bushfires.

I am calling for the Australian Government to act in four key areas - faster and fairer disaster payments, reliable energy and telecommunications, practical transitional housing, and accessible mental health support.

Yours faithfully,

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Key requests to the Australian Government

Disaster Recovery Payment: The Victorian Government should work with the National Emergency Management Agency and the Commonwealth Government to review the AGDRP to improve timeframes and reduce perverse eligibility processes and outcomes.

Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements transparency: Make DRFA activation thresholds and triggers clear and publicly understandable, so communities know when support is available and why.

DRFA delivery and betterment: Work with states and local governments to clarify responsibilities and streamline processes for DRFA delivery, including clearer processes for state agreement to NEMA-approved betterment requests.

Financial Assistance Grants: Review the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995* and the national distribution principles for Financial Assistance Grants to address structural inequities faced by rural councils, especially after disasters.

Housing: Provide additional funding to the Victorian Government to support rapid deployment of transitional accommodation after disasters that can transition to key worker housing or provide HAFF funding for transitional and crisis housing.

Temporary disaster roaming: Implement temporary disaster roaming so Australians can access any available network during disasters to make calls, receive warnings and contact emergency services.

Mandatory power backup: Legislate minimum backup power standards for critical telecommunications sites in high bushfire-risk areas to lift backup capability to at least 24 hours.

Disaster mental health: Review Commonwealth disaster mental health funding to ensure it is delivered flexibly including through trusted local hospitals, primary health services and outreach providers already embedded in fire-affected communities, consistent with the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework.

Introduction

The electorate of Indi is no stranger to bushfires. In the first quarter of this century, we've endured the Black Saturday Bushfires, the Black Summer Bushfires, and now the January 2026 bushfires.

Across two fires in Indi, known as the Longwood Fire and the Walwa River Road Fire, approximately 300 homes were destroyed, which was 75 per cent of homes lost in Victoria. Thousands of kilometres of fencing and countless sheds and agricultural assets were destroyed. Across both fires, more than 250,000 hectares have been burnt.

In the days and weeks after the fire front passed, three key themes emerged: people need clearer and more consistent information during emergencies; recovery support must be fast, fair and easy to access; and essential services, particularly power and telecommunications, must stay online longer when communities are under threat and after the immediate danger has passed.

As the Independent Federal Member for Indi, I have already taken these concerns directly to the Ministers of the Albanese Government. I have made it abundantly clear that the most important levers – national disaster payments, recovery funding settings, telecommunications regulation and program funding, and national coordination frameworks – sit squarely with the Commonwealth.

I have also advocated strongly to the Allan Victorian Government and have provided a submission to its inquiry into the 2026 bushfires, which you can read on my website.

This document sets out practical, deliverable actions that would make a real difference for people in Indi and for disaster-affected communities across Australia. I will continue to meet with affected residents and councils and local services, and I will keep the community updated on the Australian Government's progress against these requests.

Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP)

Unlike the Disaster Recovery Allowance, which determines eligibility at the local government area (LGA) level, the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP) relies on locality-by-locality listings based on primary damage assessments. I have multiple concerns about this design.

First, the AGDRP is narrowly targeted: it focuses on destroyed or seriously damaged primary residences, or serious injury or death, but does not recognise major non-residential losses (such as sheds and fencing) that carry significant financial and emotional costs for regional landholders.

Second, the two-step eligibility process, waiting for a locality to be listed and then substantiating individual losses, has been slow and distressing for communities already coping with trauma. In Indi,

localities with many homes destroyed waited days or weeks for listing, sometimes later than neighbouring areas with comparable damage and with no clear explanation of the discrepancy.

My office has heard from countless residents sharing their stories of delays, uncertainty and the emotional toll of advocating for inclusion when the catastrophic impact was obvious.

Frankly, if eligibility is ultimately proven by the level of damage to a home, it should not depend on which side of an arbitrary locality boundary a person lives. Setting eligibility at an LGA-level would avoid the absurdity of locality-by-locality listings that only served to anger, upset, and traumatise people in the days following a catastrophic bushfire. That isn't fair.

Request 1 (AGDRP): The Victorian Government should work with the National Emergency Management Agency and the Commonwealth Government to review the AGDRP to improve timeframes and reduce perverse eligibility processes and outcomes.

DRFA delivery and betterment

The Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) are central to recovery for communities and local governments in Indi. Councils and residents need clear, consistent information about what activates support and how to access it.

Discussions with communities and local governments in my electorate suggest more work is needed to support local governments to effectively work within the DRFA framework, particularly in relation to funding for betterment.

For example, local governments in my electorate frequently state that NEMA-approved betterment proposals are rejected by the Victorian Government, delaying recovery and ensuring infrastructure remains vulnerable to future disasters. They say to me that the Victorian Government must provide more clarity on its processes for determining whether it will support co-funding of betterment requests, especially where that funding has been approved by NEMA. Rural local governments would prefer that the Victorian Government and NEMA work more closely to agree on betterment funding requests.

Relatedly, two fires in the 2025-26 season, in Goomalibee and Markwood, did not trigger the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, despite considerable losses of homes and assets. My office worked extensively with both Commonwealth and Victorian Ministers for these communities; Goomalibee was eventually made eligible for Disaster Recovery Payments, but Markwood remains ineligible. This issue stems from technical requirements tied to public asset damage or local government costs, which caused confusion and frustration. Residents are confused and angry at their ineligibility compared to others facing comparable impacts.

I urge the Victorian Government and NEMA to do more to ensure the DRFA framework and activation thresholds are understood by local leaders and decision-makers.

Request 2 (DRFA transparency): Make DRFA activation thresholds and triggers clear and publicly understandable, so communities know when support is available and why.

Request 3 (DRFA betterment): Work with states and local governments to clarify responsibilities and streamline processes for DRFA delivery, including clearer processes for state agreement to NEMA-approved betterment requests.

Local Government Financial Sustainability

We cannot consider the recovery of bushfire-affected communities and their local governments without considering the broader structural challenges they face.

As the Victorian Local Government Grants Commission (VLGGC) notes in its submission to the current Commonwealth inquiry into local government financial sustainability, "not only are the needs for rural councils for financial assistance greater than those of other councils, those needs are ***increasing on a relative basis over time***" (emphasis my own). Over the past decade, the 'raw needs' of metropolitan councils in Victoria have increased by just under 10%, but for small rural councils the increase is more than 35% over the same period.

The VLGGC is blunt in its assessment that "in the absence of an increase in the size of the funding pool or changes to the national distribution principles, the Commission's ability to further improve the funding outcomes for rural councils is significantly constrained".

These findings align with evidence provided by rural councils, including in Indi, demonstrating that disaster recovery pressures are compounding structural funding inequities faced by small rural local governments.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and Transport, of which I am a member, must make strong recommendations in its final report on the Inquiry into Local Government Funding and Fiscal Sustainability. I recommend this include a wholesale review of the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995* and the national distribution principles for Financial Assistance Grants.

Request 4 (Financial Assistance Grants): Review the *Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995* and the national distribution principles for Financial Assistance Grants to address structural inequities faced by rural councils, especially after disasters.

Housing

After a bushfire, housing needs are immediate, and people need crisis accommodation quickly and then transitional options while rebuilding, which can take years.

Fire affected councils, including Murrindindi Shire, have indicated that locally led accommodation projects can be delivered quickly where funding is available, providing transitional housing for displaced residents while also addressing long term key worker shortages.

The Victorian Government's existing *Regional Worker Accommodation Fund* could be expanded through a closed or one-off grant round to achieve this dual-purpose of providing crisis and transitional accommodation to bushfire-affected households, and the longer-term objective of providing key worker accommodation.

Similarly, the Commonwealth could provide funding through the *Housing Australia Future Fund – Crisis and Transitional* to provide funding for transitional housing for bushfire-affected communities, particularly for cohorts at risk of experiencing further social, economic or physical harm due to displacement and trauma arising from the bushfires.

Request 5 (Housing): Provide additional funding to the Victorian Government to support rapid deployment of transitional accommodation after disasters that can transition to key worker housing or provide HAFF funding for transitional and crisis housing.

Telecommunications and energy security

Extended power outages during the January 2026 bushfires compounded danger across Indi. When mains power fails, people can't charge phones, access warnings, or contact family and emergency services - and telecommunications sites often go offline as limited backup power quickly runs out.

For example, Jenny of Tatong contacted my office sharing her experience with repeated outages on high-risk days. She is terrified that communications backups only provide about 90 minutes of service once mains power is lost, leaving households without a reliable way to call for help during emergencies.

Temporary disaster roaming

It is past time that Governments and telecommunications providers deploy temporary disaster roaming.

When bushfires, floods or storms hit, Australians should be able to roam onto any available mobile network to make emergency calls or receive warnings. It is achievable and has been implemented in

other countries, but the Commonwealth Government has delayed temporary disaster roaming for more than two years.

It is too late to help communities devastated by fires in my electorate this year, but it is not too late to implement temporary disaster roaming before the next fire season.

Request 6 (Temporary disaster roaming): Implement temporary disaster roaming so Australians can access any available network during disasters to make calls, receive warnings and contact emergency services.

Mandatory power backup

The January 2026 fires again saw mobile phone towers and other critical infrastructure go offline due to unavoidable mains power outages. Assets with on-site power backup fared better, often staying online for hours and days during the most important phase of the emergency response – the first 72 hours.

Communities want a minimum, mandated level of backup power for critical telecommunications infrastructure in high bushfire-risk areas, so key services remain available during prolonged outages. It's a policy I've been pushing for years and have had costed by the Parliamentary Budget Office.

Specifically, I am advocating for the Commonwealth Government to implement minimum power backup standards for critical telecommunications infrastructure in high-risk areas as a priority. That can be achieved by legislating minimum power backup standards, and expanding the Mobile Network Hardening Program, so key sites stay online for at least 24 hours during prolonged outages.

Request 7 (Mandatory power backup): Legislate minimum backup power standards for critical telecommunications sites in high bushfire-risk areas to lift backup capability to at least 24 hours.

Disaster mental health

Fires are highly traumatising events, and the impacts can last for months and years. Disaster mental health support works best when it is locally embedded and outreach-based.

In parts of Indi, including Murrindindi Shire, the Victorian Government's delivery of Commonwealth mental health funding has relied heavily on the 'Mental Health and Wellbeing Local' model, despite many fire-affected communities sitting outside any catchment. The result is longer travel, fragmented care, or services delivered by providers unfamiliar to affected communities.

While extra on-the-ground support is welcome, it often sits outside existing local networks. This is inconsistent with trauma-informed disaster recovery and risks people most in need missing out.

Murrindindi Shire has told me that providers such as Yea and District Memorial Hospital, Alexandra District Health, and the Lower Hume Primary Mental Health Service already have the capability and community trust to deliver follow-up care and outreach, but have not received additional funding.

Request 8 (Disaster mental health): Review Commonwealth disaster mental health funding to ensure it is delivered flexibly including through trusted local hospitals, primary health services and outreach providers already embedded in fire-affected communities, consistent with the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework.

Conclusion

Recovery in Indi will take time. We need mental health support for the long-haul, and genuine investment in housing for hundreds of displaced families.

We need to support our local government who, as Strathbogie Shire Council has noted, cannot hope to meet rebuilding costs under current funding arrangements that consistently underfund small rural councils.

We need to continue to improve our disaster recovery funding processes, to avoid the traumatising and unnecessary delays to receiving Disaster Recovery Payments.

I am asking the Australian Government to act on the eight requests in this document, in partnership with the Victorian Government, local councils and communities.

These reforms are practical and achievable. They will help ensure disaster payments are fair and fast, recovery funding builds back better, and essential services like telecommunications remain available when people need them most.

I will continue advocating for Indi - listening to residents and taking these priorities directly to decision-makers in Canberra, until we see the changes our communities deserve.