

# Australian Bushfires Report

January 2020 – June 2023





# Contents

## Introduction

Foreword from Interim CEO	3
A snapshot of our response	4
The impacts of your generosity since 2019	4
What we've achieved over the last year	5

## How we help after disaster

Community-led recovery works best	6
Four examples of community-led recovery	7
Supporting people through the trauma of disasters	8
Early psychosocial intervention is key to recovery	9
Kangaroo Island: A story of psychosocial support in action	9
Connecting with First Nations communities	10

## How we help with ongoing recovery

We walk alongside communities	11
Keilira's unique path to recovery	12

## How we make our best even better

Impact, accountability, and improvement	13
Helping humanity shine	14
Your support makes a real-life difference	15



## Humanity shines brightest in people's darkest moments

**In the summer of 2019-20, devastating bushfires wreaked havoc across Australia.**

The damage was catastrophic with homes destroyed and communities severely impacted, but amid the heartbreak, something truly extraordinary happened: from across the country, and the world, kindness and support poured in.

At the core of Australian Red Cross lies humanity, and the outpouring of that humanity was nothing short of remarkable. It was people helping people at a global scale.

Thanks to our generous donors, customers, partners, supporters and governments in Australia and beyond, we were humbled to receive extensive support for bushfire-impacted communities. This included financial gifts as well as donations of time and expertise. Each contribution has been invaluable in meeting people's urgent and varied needs including through ongoing recovery. I'd like to acknowledge and thank the thousands of Australian Red Cross volunteers, members and staff who continue to work tirelessly and selflessly alongside people and in communities.

As we head into a future of more frequent and intense disasters and climate-related emergencies, it is comforting to know that in times of need, the people of Australia can always count on each other to lend a hand.

Thank you for your ongoing belief in the power of acting for humanity.

**Penny Harrison**  
Interim CEO, Australian Red Cross

## A snapshot of our response

All figures featured below are for the period between January 2020 and June 2023.



**\$242m**

total raised.



**\$238.7m**

disbursed or spent by 30 June 2023.



**\$205m**

provided in direct cash grants to bushfire impacted people/households.



**\$5m**

enabled trained emergency response team members and volunteers to help with evacuations, relief centres, and outreach services.



**\$2m**

for temporary housing pods.



**\$14.8m**

spent on community recovery program/needs.



**\$3.4m**

remaining funds are enabling vital ongoing recovery work to continue through to June 2024, across 27 local government areas, including Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia.



**95 cents**

in the dollar goes directly to supporting our ongoing work with bushfire affected communities.

## The impacts of your generosity since 2019



**49,718**

people supported in evacuation centres and over the phone during the fires.



**6,131**

people received direct cash grants for urgent needs and repairs, and to cover funeral or hospital costs, find a safe place to live, recover and rebuild.



**199,124**

people have been assisted with recovery, some with more than one type of support, through 1:1 and group support, training and workshops, information and referrals.



**10,041**

people from local government, community services, and community organisations received training through workshops in Psychological First Aid, Farm First Aid, Recovery Basics, Disaster Preparedness, Communicating in Recovery, and supported through community initiatives.



**4,003**

community members supported with disaster preparedness and resilience activities.



**29,381**

hard copy resources distributed to help people recover.

## What we've achieved over the last year

**At Australian Red Cross, we're committed to giving people the support and tools they need to live with dignity and independence, no matter what comes their way.**

Our bushfire recovery work aims to do exactly this, and over the past twelve months we have continued to offer wraparound support that empowers individuals, connects communities and prepares more people for future disasters.

Over the three-year reporting period, Australian Red Cross has supported 46 bushfire impacted local government areas. After ongoing recovery needs assessments, a number of these areas are now transitioning to manage their recovery needs locally, and to local government agencies and community organisations where possible.

As a result, and with the remaining \$3.4m of donated funds, we're continuing our recovery program in 27 of these local government areas.

This important work includes recovery service provision and coordination of local psychosocial support for affected groups, recovery activities for community leaders, plus ongoing recovery and preparedness training.

This program will continue through to June 2024.

Any funds that remain at June 2024 will be used to extend support to communities still in recovery through a needs assessment process.

Where there continue to be recovery needs, we will work with other partners including governments to support that recovery.



Map shows the 27 local government areas of ongoing bushfire recovery work by Australian Red Cross that your generosity helps to support.

## Recovery program updates from 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023



**22,676**

people have been assisted with recovery, some with more than one type of support, through 1:1 and group support, training and workshops, information, and referrals.



**5,009**

people from local government, community services, and community organisations received training through workshops in Psychological First Aid, Farm First Aid, Recovery Basics, Disaster Preparedness, Communicating in Recovery, and supported through community initiatives.



**1,374**

community members supported with disaster preparedness and resilience activities.



**5,240**

hard copy resources distributed to help people recover.



## Community-led recovery works best

Empowering communities to lead their own recovery can be a powerful part of healing.

With over 100 years of disaster recovery experience, Australian Red Cross understands that communities know their needs best. That's why it's critical to make sure recovery support responds to what communities need, based on their strengths and local knowledge.

Good support links those needs to opportunities that exist for funding, grants, advocacy, and infrastructure improvements. The process of building a shared understanding of those needs in community (with often diverse views) also builds a better sense of connectedness after the immediate crisis is over – which is critical for a strong recovery.

Best practice disaster recovery also means adapting to changing individual and community needs and recognising that every community recovers at their own pace.

“Quaama, NSW embodies the heart of community-led disaster recovery. We stood beside the bushfire affected individuals and communities, offering our event project skills and wrap-around support, including Psychological First Aid, to empower community members.”

Kaley Morrissey, Recovery and Resilience Project



“The community ... has actually come together a lot more closely than it did in the past ... I feel there's a strong sense of unity and a very, very strong sense of community.”

Community service provider

## Four examples of community-led recovery

Here's how four bushfire-affected communities led their own unique recovery journey.

### Kingscote Pageant, Kangaroo Island.

Kingscote Pageant is the largest annual event held for children and families on Kangaroo Island. In 2020, it was more important than ever: after the devastation of the fires, the pageant offered a crucial sense of normality, levity and celebration to more than 800 attendees.

### Gympie Visual Recovery Project.

The Gympie Visual Recovery Project began with the Mary Street Art Project visually revitalising the retail strip using vinyl wraps on empty shops.

This added colour and interest to the area and more shops are being added over time. Australian Red Cross has been working collaboratively with the council to drive the project.

The Rotunda Project, an idea initiated by Australian Red Cross after extensive community consultation, is also well underway as part of the visual recovery plan for the region.

### Bushfire Kids Connect.

The events organised for Bushfire Kids Connect improved the psychosocial wellbeing of children and their parents in bushfire-affected communities. The idea came from Sebastian, a local seven-year-old who wanted to bring kids together to have fun after the stress of the fires.

Bushfire Kids Connect became a community-led organisation, with the development supported by us.

### Build Back Better workshop.

The Cudlee Creek community put together an event to help explain the rebuilding process. This included receiving advice from architects on structures, the council on new building requirements, and the Country Fire Service about fire access and approvals.

Also, Australian Red Cross facilitated a psychologist to talk about managing stress and making good decisions during the rebuilding process.





## Supporting people through the trauma of disasters

Australian Red Cross staff and volunteers have provided ongoing and important psychosocial support in communities impacted by bushfires. This enables communities to better manage their own recovery, support each other and access relevant services as needed by:

- Listening to and validating people's stories and experiences.
- Reassuring people that their reactions to stress are normal and encouraging them to be patient with themselves and others.
- Encouraging self-efficacy by giving people the ability to help themselves and cope with day-to-day life.

- Promoting social connection and increasing the opportunity for knowledge to be shared for better problem solving and emotional understanding.

Where needed, Australian Red Cross also brings in psychologists to talk with communities about managing stress and making good decisions during the rebuilding process. This is supported through a range of printed and online materials with expert information about stress, the body's reaction to it and practical tips on how to cope.

For further information on coping after a crisis: [redcross.org.au/recovery](https://redcross.org.au/recovery)



"Since 2019, Australian Red Cross recovery officers have established partnerships with community and local organisations, that are further strengthened by our dedicated Australian Red Cross volunteers.

This foundation of trust and existing relationships allows me to address community needs through initiatives like Psychological First Aid, Farm First Aid and Communicating in Recovery. The dependability of our volunteers, who are also community members, is the pillar of our work in bushfire impacted communities.

They have consistently delivered Psychological First Aid and, as we transition towards resilience, they remain a continuum that will continue after the program is finished. They are our community link. We are the connectors, linking community groups to other service providers, or sometimes helping them link to one another."

Erik Rau, Recovery and Resilience Officer, Bellingen and Coffs Harbour

# Early psychosocial intervention is key to recovery

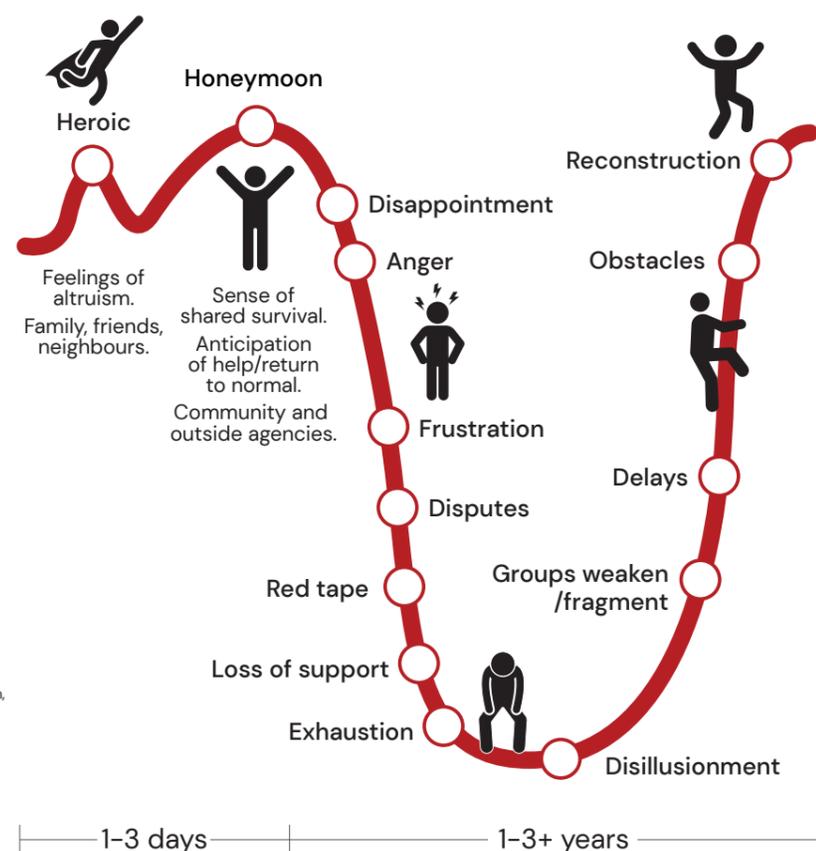
Recovery from a major disaster starts on day one. From there, it's a long, complex, and sometimes messy journey that can last for years as individuals and communities try to regain a sense of normal.

Exposure to the disruption and loss associated with humanitarian crises places significant psychological and social strain on children, adults and communities. The way people

experience and respond to disasters varies greatly. However, with the right support, the majority will be able to overcome these difficult experiences.

We know that early psychosocial interventions, such as psychological first aid, and access to timely information are crucial to achieving better outcomes for people and communities.

**A timeline for recovery.** Every recovery is unique, but they all share certain characteristics. Based on years of insights from our teams, here's what we know about the human experience of disaster recovery.



Adapted from Cohen and Ahearn, 1980, and DeWolfe, 2000.



# Kangaroo Island: A story of psychosocial support in action

During January 2020, residents of Kangaroo Island watched as emergency 'watch and act' warnings transformed into a catastrophic bushfire. Local resident Joe Tippet remembers "a cyclone of sparks and embers" that led to the loss of his business and home.

Having spent 11 years fundraising with Australian Red Cross, Joe re-joined as a Recovery Project Officer to support local bushfire recovery efforts. In the early days, stationed in the local recovery centre, he listened to the stories of people impacted by the fire and connected them to financial and practical support.

Lending a listening ear was crucial to linking people to the services they most needed: Joe would "go out and talk to people, see how they're doing. You get invaluable conversations and insight."

The need for support was widespread – even "tough farmers stepped up and said they needed help," Joe says. Australian Red Cross facilitated a series of local events to support connection and collective recovery, including a Resilience Concert that Joe describes as a "brilliant event celebrating the end of the fire."

But while the fires may have ended, the recovery process was only just beginning. Joe has already witnessed three years of recovery and rebuilding work but says there's still plenty more to be done.

"The whole island was walking around numb. Everyone was exhausted from fighting fires."

As the last bushfire recovery organisation still on the island, Australian Red Cross will continue supporting the Kangaroo Island community to move forward on their own terms. Says Joe: "It's a model that can't be rushed. It must be at the pace and capacity of the community."



# Connecting with First Nations communities

## Community first, forging footprints, and listening.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been practicing cultural recovery and resilience for over 60,000 years, navigating natural hazards and maintaining culture.

After the bushfires, Australian Red Cross responded to ongoing community needs by embedding First Nations Recovery Officers in New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia, as part of our National Bushfire Recovery Program.

These officers support recovery by adapting resources, strengthening local capacity and advocating for support.

The First Nations Recovery Group uses a strengths-based approach to guide our work in communities that helps build capacity to lead recovery and resilience efforts.

It's part of our commitment to building meaningful inclusion for these communities in the Emergency Management sector.

Our First Nations teams and communities hold unique knowledge, skills, cultural expertise, and importantly hold respect that enables them to walk beside communities impacted by disaster.

Their understanding of communities, diverse strengths and challenges enables them to embed inclusive and culturally safe pathways with the goal to achieve sustainable change.

This will be an ongoing focus across our work before during and after emergencies.

# We walk alongside communities

As time passes, our recovery work focuses on sustaining communities as they navigate long-term recovery.

In the immediate aftermath of disaster, all eyes are on the communities at the centre of recovery efforts. Now, over three years after the bushfires, the spotlight has moved on, but those impacted by the fires still face significant challenges.

Many community members and volunteers eventually become exhausted and that can compromise their mental and physical health.

Now more than ever, they need a helping hand – a friendly face and a listening ear. Plus, access to psychosocial support, social connection and other services that can help build them back up.

This is what recovery looks like years in. It's why Australian Red Cross is still on the ground, helping to build the community resilience that's so vital to long-term recovery.

By empowering communities to help themselves, we're preparing them to lead with localised action long into the future. This means assessing any ongoing needs and providing support as they transition to locally-led recovery from June 2024.

When communities are socially connected, in control of their decisions, and have the capacity to take action on their own terms, they achieve better recovery outcomes and reduce the risks of ongoing psychological stress.





## Keilira's unique path to recovery

**When bushfires struck the town of Keilira, South Australia, in late 2019, farmer and Country Fire Service member Phil Clarke took a private unit to fight the blaze. But as "crazy" winds picked up, he realised the situation was hopeless.**

Without mobile reception, Phil used a UHF radio to urge his wife to leave their home. Meeting on the road, the couple saw smoke all around them. That's when Phil turned to his wife and said, "There goes the house." Along with the house, he estimates losses of 5,600 sheep, 40 cows and 85kms of fencing.

The tight-knit Keilira community rallied around Phil and his family, chipping in to muster and put down stock, and offering to care for animals. Amid the devastation, Phil remembers the arrival of Linda McCabe, the local Australian Red Cross Recovery Officer, and the words she said to him that day: "I'm from Red Cross. We're here to help."

Linda and her team supported Keilira locals to navigate financial grants, as well as to access psychosocial support via local meetings and social events. Phil says the community valued knowing someone cared. "Just their presence – knowing in the back of your mind, they're there." Australian Red Cross saw the need for long term recovery. COVID-19 meant the first time the community could fully get together was six months after the fires. Three fires in three years also impacted the process.

Keilira's journey shows how community-led recovery really works, alongside ongoing support to continually see where more help is needed. Looking back Phil says, "Talking about it now you well up a little bit still".

### Here's how we supported ongoing recovery efforts in Keilira:

- Connected community leaders with mentoring and lived experienced support through our Disaster Recovery Mentors and Advisors group.
- Linked bushfire impacted people to Australian Red Cross cash assistance.
- Provided Psychological First Aid and used community outreach and support networks to help people months after the fires.
- Brought communities together to talk about their recovery needs at local decision-making meetings, community events and gatherings.
- Supported new and existing community leaders to inform and engage in recovery activities.
- Supported community-led initiatives focused on capacity building and promoting connectedness.
- Delivered a range of expert training and facilitated workshops for local councils and community stakeholders involved in a variety of recovery efforts.
- Conducted emergency preparedness training and workshops for community groups, including children in primary school.



## Impact, accountability and improvement

**Australian Red Cross knows every community is different, and every recovery takes a different path.**

A key focus for us is learning and evaluating our work so next time, we can improve and be better prepared. Currently, the University of Melbourne is conducting an independent evaluation of our Bushfire Recovery Program.

Their goal is to measure the program's appropriateness, relevance, and impact to help us continue strengthening the services we deliver. Here's what the people and service providers in the communities said about our work:

"Australian Red Cross became involved and helped to expand the project with expert knowledge. That's what's been of so much value. Expert knowledge and the expertise to impart that knowledge."

Service Provider, Queensland.

"Things like the CLER workshops (now Redi Communities) with Australian Red Cross have been really quite powerful. There's one community that has been right through the process and now they're coming out the other side. It's about making people feel that they do have capacity."

Service Provider, South Australia.

"We have not had gatherings for a long time. That was the best because it brought people back together. It's good to see people laughing and talking. It was lovely to see all that."

Community Member, New South Wales.

# Helping humanity shine

**In times of disaster, and afterwards in recovery, Australian Red Cross provides assistance in many different ways to help communities thrive.**

“Support what’s already in the community.”

Jessica Davison. Recovery-Resilience Lead, Emergency Services, Victoria.

Jessica was doing recovery work in North East Victoria and said, “locals became reclusive after the disaster.” To strengthen community bonds she supported social events and programs like Working Dogs, a training event for farmers and their dogs, and the Men’s Shed, to help socially isolated older men come together.

“Red Cross continue supporting community in so many ways.”

Ross and Faye Neil. Glenreagh, NSW.

Working in recovery with Australian Red Cross in Northern NSW, Faye and Ross saw people seriously struggling. But hope was provided by Australian Red Cross who were “always helping out with field days and focus groups”.

In their ongoing support work, Faye and Ross recognise that “Red Cross keeps giving them the momentum to keep going.”

“Your work is meaningful, respectful, generous and fair.”

Tom Wotton. Grant recipient, Wandella, NSW.

Tiny NSW town, Wandella, was devastated by a bushfire. Local resident Tom said, “Australian Red Cross grants have been the difference between building a secure future ahead or having to sellup and rent for the rest of my life, leave my community and job.”

“He didn’t even realise he was stressed. He just didn’t feel right.”

Sally Randall. Australian Red Cross, Queensland.

Part of Sally’s role was to work alongside other agencies as they supported their communities. This meant organising and conducting workshops with bushfire affected locals about how to recognise and manage the signs and symptoms of stress. “One of the groups I worked with was the Rural Fire Service. We often forget the people in the community who put their hand up to help and support others.”





## Your support makes a real-life difference

The response and recovery work outlined in this report was only possible because of the generosity of our donors, financial supporters and our corporate partners. Your donations, time, energy and expertise are appreciated beyond what words can express.

As disasters become more frequent, more severe and increase the humanitarian impacts, people like you matter more than ever. It's only with your ongoing support that we can continue to be there for communities facing hardship across the country.

Thank you for leading with compassion and for acting with humanity, now and into the future.

For further information on our recovery work:  
[redcross.org.au/recovery](https://redcross.org.au/recovery)

For further information on preparing for emergencies:  
[redcross.org.au/prepare](https://redcross.org.au/prepare)

1800 RED CROSS (1800 733 276)  
[contactus@redcross.org.au](mailto:contactus@redcross.org.au)