



Canberra  
Business Chamber

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Ms. Sarah Redden  
Secretary  
Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees  
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Canberra ACT 2600  
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Dear Ms Redden

**RE: 2019-20 Australian Bushfire Season Inquiry**

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission on this topic.

The Canberra Business Chamber is the peak body of the private sector in the Australian Capital Territory, a city which has approximately 30,000 active trading businesses. Our membership includes more than 600 businesses based in the ACT, and many in the adjoining NSW border communities of Queanbeyan, Yass, Braidwood, and surrounds. We also represent more than 50 peak industry and not-for-profit member groups covering a wide range of industries, professions and trade sectors.

The Canberra and capital region business community was uniquely affected by the bushfires that took place. We suffered no burning of houses or commercial premises as such, yet the severe and extended smoke which enveloped the region had a major impact on local residents and businesses, restricting movement and forcing many firms to close their doors. Many seasonal (summer-based) firms sustained financial losses, especially those in the retail and tourism sectors, whilst other enterprises were forced to operate at reduced capacity. This took place over a sustained period of time, and was not a one- or two-day temporary nuisance.

Yet financial and practical support for business was limited. A focus on fire as the main cause of business damage and loss meant that smoke-induced losses were neglected or ignored.

As an example, consider the small business assistance programs listed on the commonwealth's bushfire recovery website – specifically the webpage [Small businesses | National Bushfire Recovery Agency](#). It lists a number of financial support measures, but firms in the ACT are excluded from the \$50,000 recovery grants program. It is unclear why such a decision was made, and seemingly ignores the fact that some of our local businesses suffered significant financial losses.

Simply put, many local businesses were often apparently overlooked by policymakers and existing support systems. At the federal level, government seemingly regarded smoke-induced loss as merely a nuisance and short-term impact, rather than as a genuine business problem.

In practice, though, smoke-induced losses can be just as significant as a fire itself. A business that cannot open its door because of damaging smoke loses as much income as a business that cannot open its door because there is a fire nearby. A business who loses customers because smoke exceeds



WHO health levels suffers as much a loss as a firm whose customers are unwilling to travel (or who have fled) during a fire.

We believe that in future, heavy and sustained smoke-induced losses should be regarded as serious events, and that businesses so affected should be provided with relevant support.

Equally notable were the cross-border differences in levels of support. A business trading in Queanbeyan, NSW differs very little from one trading in the adjoining locality of Oaks Estate or Fyshwick ACT, yet different governments have provided differential levels of support.

Australian governments have developed a patchwork of different approaches to business support and recovery during fire and other disasters. Support varies significantly from one state to another; the rules governing their applicability also vary; and information dissemination by governments also varies. This is confusing and inefficient.

All jurisdictions ultimately are trying to assist business, but the current piecemeal, ad-hoc approach does not work. We believe state, territory and federal governments should combine their business assistance approaches and attempt to develop a standardized set of support measures that can be applied to all firms, especially small ones, regardless of their location. The Chamber would be happy to work with government and the Parliament on any such initiative.

Yours sincerely

Graham Catt  
Chief Executive Officer