

Submission Number: NND.001.00823

Submission Of: Donald Stuart Garden

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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise? Community history and heritage organisations

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation? Federation of Australian Historical Societies

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

The Federation of Australian Historical Societies appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Natural Disaster Royal Commission.

FAHS is the umbrella body for Australia's community history and heritage associations which number over 1000 and have approximately 100,000 members. Our volunteer members are deeply involved in working towards the best preservation and presentation of Australian cultural heritage in all its forms. They undertake very large volume of historical research and collection in hard (documentary, movable objects and built/sites) and digital forms, and they transmit our history and heritage in publications, exhibitions and other formats

Historical societies were very fortunate to emerge relatively unscathed from the recent bushfires, although there have been many cases in the past when fires, floods, storms, etc, have damaged or destroyed collections and buildings. Last summer only one, at Mallacoota in Victoria, lost its building and collection.

However, there were many heritage structures and sites (buildings, bridges, railways and Indigenous art sites) destroyed or damaged.

FAHS wishes to thank and congratulate those involved in the bushfire emergency response as without the mammoth effort that they made, the damage and destruction would have been far greater.

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

We are not aware of any failures relative to our sector.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

FAHS is principally concerned with ensuring the best possible security for cultural heritage collections in the future as the dangers from climate change and natural disasters escalate. To this end it is essential that small community groups are given support to protect and preserve their collections. Collectively they hold millions of items that form a significant part of the Distributed National Collection, and which are generally invaluable and irreplaceable.

Support is required in the following ways:

Digitisation. FAHS has for many years been assisting and encouraging societies to digitise their collections and store the digital data offsite, in the cloud or some other repository. FAHS was a founding member of GLAM Peak which received important government assistance to promote this goal, but there is still a great deal to be done. Financial support is required to enable the acquisition of the necessary hardware and software, but just as important are training measures to give members of community organisations the necessary skills to undertake the digitisation.

Buildings. Many community groups are located in heritage buildings that are subject to danger from fire, flood, deterioration, etc. Assistance is required (given that many members are elderly) to enable them to provide preventative measures such as clearing of dangerously close vegetation, clearing blocked gutters, fixing roofs, establishing appropriate drainage, etc.

Safe storage of hard copies and originals. While digitisation of collections ensures that one format of the materials might be permanently secure, collections may be (and have been) lost in fires, floods, etc. It is therefore recommended that in each region a place of secure storage be established where community groups might lodge the hard copies of their collection records. In some cases this might be done permanently, but as societies are continuously working on their collections they will likely want to keep at least part of them in their premises, but have have the capacity to move them to secure storage when any threat is perceived.

Such secure spaces would ideally be located in local government premises such as galleries, libraries or museums, but this will vary according to locality, distances, available facilities, etc. These arrangements need to be discussed and planned locally, but state and federal assistance will likely be required for the provision of both secure premises and transport of collections when needed.

Blue Shield Australia. FAHS was a founding member of Blue Shield Australia which is the lead organisation for the protection of cultural heritage collections from natural disasters. BSA promotes disaster planning and awareness amongst archives, libraries, museums, galleries, heritage places, historical societies, local history groups and other cultural heritage organisations. It is in great need of, and is highly deserving of, greater recognition and financial support.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

FAHS wishes simply to repeat the need for governments and authorities to be aware of the vulnerability of much of our moveable and fixed cultural heritage. The collected items underlie the stories of our national history and heritage and are in need of recognition, preservation and protection in the face of potential disasters.

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name