

13 February 2020

Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) Consensus Statement on the Australian Bushfires

ACOLA expresses our deepest sympathy and support to all Australians affected by the recent and ongoing bushfires, particularly those who have lost loved ones. The recent rain has assisted greatly in putting out many fires, however, their ferocity may create additional challenges. The collective long-term impact of these events is still unknown. However, the economic impact alone is already estimated by Professor John Quiggin FASSA to be in the order of \$100 billion. We recognise the hard work and generosity of so many: our firefighters, many of whom are volunteers; first responders; community leaders; businesses and individuals, both local and international; and aid from governments overseas, whose contributions are supporting Australia's response and recovery.

ACOLA is the platform for collaboration between Australia's Learned Academies, to bring together Australia's greatest minds across all research domains to contribute to national policy and develop innovative solutions to complex global problems and emerging national needs. We are unique in Australia in providing trusted, independent, interdisciplinary and publicly available research-based advice.

Building on the statements from the Learned Academies, it is clear that the nation – government, industry, academia and the public – must come together to respond not only to the immediate impacts and recovery from bushfires but also to the underlying issues that have contributed to their intensity.

Alongside efforts to address regionally relevant industries such as agriculture and tourism, recovery efforts must focus on addressing the breadth of economic, cultural, health and social impacts. This includes:

- **Food and water security:** Agricultural land and livestock have been compromised, including bees and insects which are crop pollinators. The full extent of the impact is still unknown. However, supplies for humans and animals will be impacted. Recent rainfall has contributed to run-off of sediment, nutrients and contaminants into rivers and water storage, presenting further risks to aquatic life and food supply.
- **Social, cultural and health impacts:** The devastation will elicit immediate and medium- to long-term effects on physical and mental health that will require action and research. There are also long term cultural and social impacts, including the loss of significant and sacred sites for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- **Recovery of our flora and fauna:** The widespread devastation to established forests, biodiversity and wildlife populations have threatened and marginalised the existence of at least 250 threatened species, of which 25 are critically endangered. Assessing the scale of devastation and protecting endangered species requires urgent attention.

Climate change is a major contributor to the risk, frequency and severity of bushfires and drought. Significant work is required to understand and develop robust, evidence-based strategies to mitigate and adapt to our changing climate. Waiting for other countries to take stronger action first is not a viable option.

What are we already doing?

ACOLA and the Learned Academies are supporting the Australian Government, including Australia's Chief Scientist, by providing expert advice on potential research and policy initiatives. Many of our Fellows are working with communities, relief and recovery agencies and governments, and continue to contribute their expertise to understand and mitigate the causes and consequences of these disasters.

We are considering how our current and future research projects – on the Internet of Things, and on enhancing research outcomes from Australia's regional, rural and remote universities – could help to enhance the evidence and opportunities to support bushfire and climate change preparedness and responsiveness. Further information on our current projects, and additional projects as they are announced, can be found at www.acola.org.

What next?

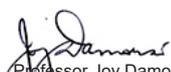
There is uncertainty about the best actions to adapt to and mitigate our changing climate and to be prepared for similar future events. The solutions to complex problems require multidisciplinary insights and expert collaboration that ACOLA is uniquely positioned and qualified to deliver. We are ready and able, through our broad and deep Australian-leading research expertise, to support governments, industry and philanthropic organisations to develop critical evidence-based advice to respond to Australia's immediate and future needs.

ACOLA is working with the Australian Government and its members to identify the most effective projects and advice that will complement and enhance existing efforts, such as better understanding the research needed to ensure our energy sector achieves net-zero emissions.

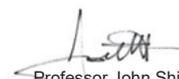
The best decisions are informed by the best evidence. It is time for all decision makers to take action that is underpinned by robust research. Politicians, governments, industry and academia must work in unison, trust and harmony. Our nation deserves this.



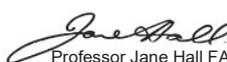
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