



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING  
Mr Johnathan Davis MLA (Chair), Mr James Milligan MLA (Deputy Chair)  
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

### Inquiry into West Belconnen supercell thunderstorm

**Submission Number: 013**

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Select Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing  
ACT Legislative Assembly  
GPO Box 1020  
CANBERRA ACT 2601  
Email: [LACommitteeHCW@parliament.act.gov.au](mailto:LACommitteeHCW@parliament.act.gov.au)

**INQUIRY INTO WEST BELCONNEN SUPERCELL THUNDERSTORM –SUBMISSION BY DISASTER RELIEF AUSTRALIA LIMITED**

Dear Sirs,

Please find attached a submission to the Inquiry by Disaster Relief Australia.

My point of contact in this matter is the Chief Operating Officer, [REDACTED] who can be contacted via email at [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Geoff Evans  
CEO Disaster Relief Australia

21 April 2022

**INQUIRY INTO WEST BELCONNEN SUPERCELL THUNDERSTORM –  
SUBMISSION BY DISASTER RELIEF AUSTRALIA LIMITED**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The ACT Environment</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>DRA in the ACT</b>	<b>4</b>
Membership	4
Community Support	4
<b>Scope of other ACT Agencies</b>	<b>5</b>
ACT City Services	5
ACT SES	5
ACT ESA	5
ACT Fire+Rescue	5
ACT RFS	6
<b>Why DRA</b>	<b>6</b>
DRA is an Australian Company	6
Project Resilience	7
Communities on the Front Line	7
Aerial Damage Assessment Team	7
Cost savings	7
Funding	8
Community Feedback	8
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>8</b>

## Summary

On 10 February 2022 the ACT Legislative Assembly's Health and Community Wellbeing Committee resolved to undertake an *'Inquiry into the West Belconnen supercell thunderstorm'* (the Inquiry) into a storm event that had occurred on 3 January 2022. The intent of the inquiry is to *"help Canberrans and the ACT Government be better prepared for storm events"*.<sup>i</sup>

In response to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry<sup>ii</sup> Mr Geoff Evans, CEO of Disaster Relief Australia (DRA) makes this submission to outline the skills, experience and qualifications that DRA is able to provide to support future disaster events in collaboration with the ACT Government and other ACT agencies.

DRA was not consulted or contacted to request support in the aftermath of the storm cell that is focus of the Inquiry.

DRA has the ability to rapidly deploy reconnaissance and assistance in the wake of a disaster and has the following specialist capabilities:

- incident management
- damage and impact assessment
- aerial damage assessment and mapping
- debris management and access restoration
- logistics management and aid delivery
- spontaneous volunteer management
- work order management
- expedient home repairs
- building community resilience and capacity

Specifically, on a cost-recovery basis, DRA can offer the ACT Government:

- aerial imagery and data mapping with a fleet of remotely piloted aircraft and trained specialists
- specialist assessment of infrastructure, assets, vulnerabilities and preparation priorities
- scenario modelling and disaster planning workshops to collect community feedback
- creation, management and execution of local community projects, with community collaboration encouraged
- training and management of local community volunteers
- dedicated volunteers skilled in chainsaw work, route clearance and property access, debris removal, fencing repair, and expedient home repairs.

DRA represents significant and proven capability in the Emergency Management and Disaster Relief space.

This submission recommends that:

- DRA be included as a support organisation in the ACT Emergency Plan,
- DRA hold a standing position on the ACT Multi-Hazard Advisory Board, and
- ACT Government assist DRA with recruiting new members to provide support in future disasters.

## **Background**

Disaster Relief Australia is a professional disaster relief organisation with a unique culture and history dedicated to the service of communities in need, and to serving each other. DRA volunteers are veterans, current and former emergency services and civilians who are skilled across a myriad of disaster recovery capabilities including chain-sawing, debris management, access restoration, aerial damage assessments, fence repairing, sifting and community resilience building.

The mission of DRA is to “*unite the skills and experience of military veterans with emergency services specialists to rapidly deploy disaster relief teams in Australia and around the world in the wake of natural disasters*”<sup>iii</sup>. In short, by preparing for and responding to disasters, DRA provides veterans the opportunity to grow beyond their military service. Disaster relief has proven to be a powerful tool to help veterans transition back into society and their local communities.

DRA believes that veterans have unique skills and experience that can be harnessed to assist disaster affected communities. It recognises that many veterans have an ongoing desire to serve others. DRA is governed by principles that place a high value on servant leadership, maturity, integrity, teamwork and determination. DRA has over 2500 volunteers and coordinates eight operational Disaster Relief Teams (DRTs) in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales, Victoria, South Queensland, North Queensland, Northern Territory, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia.

## **The ACT environment**

Local news reporting indicates that of severe weather claims in the ACT in 2020, 45 per cent were the result of storms or hail. 81 per cent of all home claims caused by storms in the ACT were made during the six-month “storm season” (October 2020-March 2021).

The ACT Emergency Plan identifies storm events as one of the key natural disaster hazards for the ACT region.

Research released by NRMA found that 47 per cent of ACT residents say they are not ready to respond if severe weather hits their suburb. The research, which surveyed more than 500 ACT residents, also found that 79 per cent are worried natural disasters are becoming more frequent and severe.<sup>iv</sup>

## **DRA in the ACT**

Membership. The ACT DRT presently consists of 160 volunteers able to provide support and assist in the recovery phase of natural disasters within the ACT (including surrounding NSW areas of Queanbeyan Palerang and Yass Valley Councils). The ACT DRT has shipping container style storage facilities located in Hume - with permanent facilities being established, with the assistance of the ACT Lions Club, in Kambah. The ACT DRT has a leadership team of six volunteers across specialised areas of management, mobilisation, operations, training and membership.

The Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) Annual Report 2020-2021 states that Canberra has a population of 13,114 DVA clients indicating a concentrated source of former serving Defence members.<sup>v</sup> Whilst not all will become volunteers of DRA, the potential to leverage the unit set of skills and experience of veterans to assist in disaster relief efforts is substantial.

Community Support. Over the last 12 months the ACT DRT has:

- helped over 300 families with bushfire recovery work in the Snowy Valley, Eurobodalla and Bega shires;

- provided gardening and home maintenance assistance to over 25 elderly veterans; and
- assisted ACT Girl Guides with maintenance of their Majura camp.

Of particular note, the ACT DRT delivered over 4200 food and hygiene hampers to over 2100 Canberra homes during COVID lockdown in the latter half of 2021 for the Canberra Relief Network and ACT Government Community Services Directorate. In just the first two weeks of lockdown, DRA had delivered 2225 boxes to 1050 locations across ACT.

As a result, the ACT DRT was awarded the Volunteering Team of the Year in the ACT Volunteering Awards for *“a team, program or organisation whose volunteering contributions made a significant impact in 2020-2021.”*<sup>vi</sup>

### **Scope of other ACT agencies**

The scope of work for DRA is limited only by the ingenuity of the teams on the ground. For DRA teams, natural disasters do not end when the emergency declaration ceases or first responders stand down. By default and design other agencies do not have the same flexibility and are often constrained by legislation to only undertaking 'make safe' type activities. In the case of flood events agencies responsibilities usually end when people are evacuated from their home to an evacuation centre, with little or no support being provided to return to their home, or to clean up flood or storm damage.

As an example, DRA is currently providing a rolling series of deployment 'waves' in support of the ongoing flood crisis in northern NSW, known as Operation Kelliher<sup>vii</sup>. Operation Kelliher is now entering its sixth set of week-long deployment rotations with each team consisting of up to 60 people – and with another three weeks of rotations being developed. While there is work to be done, and volunteers to do it, DRA will remain on location.

DRA is not only assisting home owners with clean up and removal of damaged goods from their houses, but are also assisting with removal of internal wall linings, cleaning of mud and spraying of mould retardant. Furthermore, DRA is undertaking a critical role in the coordination of works by the ADF, local Council and other support and relief agencies, through our Incident Management Team structure. We also provide disaster information and intelligence services to Council and State agencies.

By design, other agencies are limited in their approach or exposure. As an example, and without any criticism whatsoever, this submission notes the following:

ACT City Services. As a result of the 3 January storm incident more than 2,000 tasks were identified from requests made by the public through *Fix My Street* and through completed clean-up audits. Many of these jobs required significant work and time to complete. The City Services accept *“the scale of the damage, and the safety risks presented by the task at hand, means that recovery will be long, on-going and may take months to complete.”*<sup>viii</sup>

ACT SES. The ACT SES is a highly active volunteer emergency service and is the lead ACT emergency service in planning for, and responding to, storms and floods. However, in a disaster event the ACTSES will only conduct temporary repairs to make homes or businesses safe and prevent further damage. The ACT SES will not:

- conduct permanent repairs
- remove rubbish
- transport green waste
- clean gutters or

- prune trees<sup>ix</sup>

SES has approximately 400 volunteers and is currently not recruiting in 2022. Given the timing of the supercell event during January school holidays, not all SES volunteers were available to assist. Furthermore, with many of the 2000+ requests for assistance to SES being related to fallen trees, the SES simply did not have sufficient qualified chainsaw operators available.

ACT ESA. The ACT ESA stood up an immediate whole of agency response to support a number of households impacted by the storm event on 3 January 2022. Additionally it conducts a routine community awareness campaign in September each year to help residents prepare for the storm season.<sup>x</sup>

ACT Fire + Rescue ACT Fire + Rescue provides a 24/7 rapid response capability from nine Fire Stations. ACT Fire & Rescue provides immediate and emergency response services to the community for:

- Structure Fires
- Hazardous Materials Incidents
- Bushfires
- Chemical, Biological and Radiological Incidents
- Vehicle Fires
- Building Collapse
- Confined Space Rescue
- Motor Vehicle Accident Rescue
- Trench Rescue
- Animal Rescue
- Emergency Medical Assistance
- Fire Engineered Building Solutions
- Fire Safety Compliance
- Fire Hazard Inspections
- Community Education
- Fire Investigation
- Community Events Planning
- Community Safety Planning
- Coordinate Community Fire Units<sup>xi</sup>
- Storm Damage Assistance
- Automatic Fire Alarms
- Communications Support to Emergency Agencies

Whilst ACT Fire + Rescue can assist with store damage subject to crew availability, their priority is immediate and emergency response.

ACTRFS is responsible for protecting life, property and the environment from all bush and grass fires in rural ACT areas including:

- hazard reduction and supporting land management.
- working with people living in the rural area to make sure they have everything they need to protect themselves and their property.
- responding to all fires in the ACT's rural areas.
- engagement and education activities for community volunteers to ensure they have the information they need to stay safe before, during and after emergencies.<sup>xii</sup>

## WHY DRA?

DRA is an Australian company (ACN 614 474 010)<sup>xiii</sup> limited by guarantee and registered with the Australian Charities and Not for Profits Commission. DRA is an Australian Non-Government Organisation (NGO) and a Public Benevolent Institution (a charity) and endorsed as a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) by the Australian Tax Office.

DRA Corporate Governance Framework is outlined in the DRA Strategic Plan 2020-2024 which outlines four deliberate goals:

- Our Tribe – our volunteers are leaders in disaster relief, humanitarian practice and veteran reintegration;
- Disaster Resilient Communities – the leader in disaster mitigation and community preparedness;
- Disaster Relief Operations – to become the pre-eminent disaster relief organisation both in Australia and throughout the Asia-Pacific region;
- A strong organisation – aligning our resources to the goals and objectives of the Strategic Plan and remaining accountable for our performance.

Annual Reports evaluate the progress of goals outlined in the Strategic Plan.

Project Resilience. In addition to DRA's recovery work it leads 'Project Resilience', in collaboration with the Minderoo Resilient Communities Initiative, which aims to assist communities to be more resilient to natural hazards by 2025. Backed by the skills and experience of military veterans, emergency services specialists and an army of dedicated volunteers, DRA can empower communities with projects that build resilience to disasters and foster a sense of community pride bringing the following benefits of a string resilience plan to the ACT by:

- Reducing exposure to hazards, lessening the vulnerability of people and property and managing the local natural environment.
- Fostering community connections to improve social and mental health outcomes and community cohesion in times of need.
- Empowering local leaders to make effective and informed decisions that prioritise community safety and infrastructure.
- Building a strong coping capacity to prepare for and bounce back from natural disasters that disrupt the community way of life.

Communities on the Front Line. Prior to recent Government and media focus on the idea of a Veterans Volunteer Service<sup>xiv</sup> DRA is already progressing the implementation of a national Disaster Volunteer Engagement Plan. This plan enhances the volunteer factor in disaster management planning and advocates for DRA to be positioned as the lead agency responsible on operational deployment for all spontaneous volunteers (SponVols) to provide an immediate and localised disaster response capability – 'Communities on the Front Line' – which develops:

- a determined, resilient and sustainable community through the disaster response and recovery phase
- a proactive and sustainable disaster relief and community support capability following the recovery phase and
- a national asset consisting of trained volunteers, capable for conducting disaster relief, community support, resilience and preparedness activities.

Aerial Damage Assessment Team (ADAT). DRA is continuing to develop the ADAT using the DRA owned and operated remotely piloted aircraft fleet and DRA specialists to increase the effectiveness of post-disaster operations providing:



- an immediate disaster relief capability providing vital intelligence to complement other agencies and existing manned aviation capabilities;
- actionable and timely data and intelligence to aid decision making by national and state or territory level emergency management agencies and communities;
- increased capability through the utilisation of new technology to enable world leading aerial data collection for disaster response and recovery operations; and
- a national asset with highly trained operators providing intelligence to other agencies.

Cost savings. The DRA bushfire recovery activities in Eurobodalla and Bega Valley shires equated to a labour impact of \$459,976 having placed 205 volunteers across 9578 hours over 12 weeks to assist 90 households to commence recovery. Costs of damage assessments on a further 159 properties were not evaluated.

From 5-31 March 2022; Op Kelliher had a labour impact value of over \$750,000 with 15,055 volunteer hours and 382 jobs completed in the first three weeks – with four more rotations still to be completed.

Funding. DRA works on a basis of having a pre-defined and pre-established understanding of how to recover costs. On a case-by-case basis we would look to establish a fee-for-service for discrete professional service offerings.

#### Community Feedback

*“We’ve been working for a couple of days trying to move all this rubbish up from 2 floors underground up to the street level. It’s been hectic here since the weekend. As we started to pump the water out you could see where it got to and the amount of damage that was done. We couldn’t have done all this without you. Having the extra hands here today has made such a difference and we can’t thank you enough for all the help.”*

*“It’s been a tough few years for us. We have been busy working and trying to figure things out. We’ve only been back out on the block for less than a year, I’ve had limited time and I’ve lost a lot of my tools and equipment. So what Disaster Relief Australia did in one day would have taken me weeks, if not months, you know, so yeah, we’re really grateful. It’s been very nice to meet all your people. Down the track I might have to sign up with Disaster Relief Australia, get involved and pass on the help.”*

*“Disaster Relief Australia made a big difference, about a dozen or so people did a massive job over two days, everything that I wanted to go has gone. Now I have hope again, I feel hope that maybe I can like the place again, I feel good. Now I can feel and see the kindness of people that will help me restart. I haven’t had hope for quite a while.”*

#### **Conclusion**

Disaster Relief Australia is a professional disaster relief organisation with a unique culture and history dedicated to the service of communities in need, and to serving each other. DRA volunteers are veterans who are skilled across a myriad of disaster recovery capabilities including qualified chain-sawing operators, debris management, access restoration, aerial damage assessments, fence repairing, sifting and community resilience building. The ACT DRT is established and already providing support to the ACT Government and has vehicles and equipment to support what we do.

## Recommendations

This submission recommends that:

- DRA be included as a support organisation in the ACT Emergency Plan,
- DRA hold a standing position on the ACT Multi-Hazard Advisory Board, and
- ACT government assist DRA with recruiting new members to provide support in future disasters.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/media-releases/2022/media-release-committee-starts-inquiry-into-the-west-belconnen-supercell-thunderstorm>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/committees/hcw/inquiry-into-the-west-belconnen-supercell-thunderstorm>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://disasterreliefaus.org/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://citynews.com.au/2021/which-act-suburb-is-the-hardest-hit-by-storms/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.transparency.gov.au/annual-reports/department-veterans-affairs/reporting-year/2020-21-50>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.volunteeringact.org.au/get-involved/volunteering-awards/2021-volunteering-awards-winners/>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://disasterreliefaus.org/field-ops/operation-kelliher/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.cityservices.act.gov.au/news/news-and-events-items/january-2022/belconnen-storm-recovery>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://esa.act.gov.au/about-esa-emergency-services/state-emergency-service/faq>

<sup>x</sup> <https://esa.act.gov.au/january-2022-storms-community-information>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://esa.act.gov.au/emergency-services/fire-rescue/who-we-are>

<sup>xii</sup> <https://esa.act.gov.au/about-esa-emergency-services/rural-fire-service/who-we-are>

<sup>xiii</sup> Constitution of Disaster Relief Australia under the *Corporations Act 2001*

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/national/army-reserve-style-emergency-force-could-improve-disaster-response-cosgrove-20220311-p5a3xv.html>