



Submission cover sheet

Inquiry into the Emergencies Amendment Bill 2026

Submission number: 007

Submitter: Peter Dunn AO

Date authorised for publication: 12 August 2026

SUBMISSION TO THE LEGISLATIVE REVIEW COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE ACT EMERGENCIES Bill 2026

BY Major General Peter Dunn, AO (Retd)

(Former Inaugural Commissioner, ACT Emergency Services Authority. Member of Emergency Leaders for Climate Action)

The amendments proposed for the ACT Emergencies Act, which would disband the Natural Hazards Advisory Committee, are deeply concerning and warrant serious reconsideration. The NHAC should be strengthened, not removed.

Background

The current-day rural fire services had their origins in country groups that came together to respond to local bushfire emergencies. These groups became known as bushfire brigades. The captains of these brigades were elected by the community and were respected leaders in those communities. They possessed extensive local and community knowledge. Over time, these bushfire brigades were brought together under state- and territory-based rural fire services. Centralisation of these rural fire services has continued, and the policies and actions of rural brigades are now tightly controlled by headquarters far removed from the rural areas they support. Similar centralisation exists within the State Emergency Service.

Such centralisation is not altogether a bad thing. It allows for better equipment acquisition, improved training and the ability to redeploy assets to areas of high need during an emergency. The downside is that local requirements and local knowledge are not always fully understood or heard by distant headquarters. This can mean that, for all natural hazards, a “one size fits all” approach becomes the default model for emergency management and response.

Lessons Learnt from the 2003 Canberra Bushfire Disaster

The NHAC has its origins in the ACT Bushfire Council. Two major factors led to the inclusion of the ACT Bushfire Council in the new ACT Emergencies Act, which I was personally involved in drafting after the 2003 Canberra Bushfire Disaster.

First, the scale of the firestorm made clear that any future response to an emergency of this size had to be a whole-of-government response. Secondly, local knowledge was a critical element of any response and needed to be legislated so that it would always be taken into account during response operations.

The legislation that emerged attempted to make those lessons permanent through changes to bodies such as the ACT Emergency Management Committee and by recognising the important role of rural fire brigade captains and the local knowledge they embodied and drew from the members of their brigades.

The Impact of Climate Change

The severity of the firestorm in 2003 forced a re-evaluation of planning, preparation, response and recovery, not only in the ACT but across all Australian jurisdictions. A key finding was that climate change-fuelled extreme weather events can drive bushfires that occur at very short notice, cover extremely large geographic areas, affect entire communities and surrounding districts, and are likely to become uncontrollable. These lessons have been learned repeatedly in Australia, including after the major fires of 2006 and 2009 and the 2019–20 Black Summer fires.

For these climate change-driven reasons, emergency responses must be whole-of-government, and the mechanisms to ensure this must be enshrined in legislation. The NHAC is one such mechanism. If changes are to be made, I recommend expanding the NHAC rather than removing it. A single person is not in a position to provide the necessary advice to the ACT Government to ensure the community is adequately protected against the impacts of extreme climate events, not just bushfires.

These same lessons are now being learned in Europe and North America, where the northern hemisphere is experiencing a severe extreme weather crisis that is driving destructive fires and mass evacuations of entire communities and regions. The associated heatwave is having a massive effect as well.

A Key Difference Between Urban Fire and Rescue and Rural Fire Services

Urban Fire and Rescue services are highly skilled professional organisations. Their members are highly trained and required to respond within minutes to the scene of an emergency. They also possess many of the skills required to respond to major natural hazards. However, the emergencies they respond to are usually focused on a specific point, or on providing specialised personnel to protect urban community members. Urban Fire and Rescue responses seldom require a whole-of-government response. Advice to government is appropriately provided by senior specialist Urban Fire and Rescue officers.

By contrast, the nature of rural fire services response frequently requires a whole-of-government approach because of the geographic area affected by the emergency and the size of the population directly involved. Government advice must be drawn from as wide a base as possible to ensure public safety and environmental sustainability. Advisory committees are the most effective mechanism for providing this advice. This is also the case for other major natural hazards (fires, storms, floods and heatwaves for example).

Conclusion

This brief submission places the NHAC in its contemporary context. The ACT Government and the Commissioner of the ACT Emergency Services Agency require the best possible advice to ensure that natural hazards are managed effectively and that community safety is protected during significant natural disasters. Advice is also required by Directorate Chief Executives so they can prepare staff and be ready to deploy them in support of emergency services.

I submit to the Committee that the NHAC should be strengthened rather than removed. It is a key element in providing the best possible advice to government and supporting an effective whole-of-government response to future climate change-fuelled extreme weather events.

Given the brevity of this submission, caused by time limitations owing to my work relating to the situation in Europe and overseas travel, I would be pleased to appear before the Committee and elaborate further.

Peter Dunn, AO

Major General (Retd)