

**Submission  
No 11**

## **REVIEW OF THE NSW RECONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY ACT 2022**

**Organisation:** Curraweela Community Group

**Date Received:** 12 May 2024

The Curraweela Community,

c/- Mr Frank Startari,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

3<sup>rd</sup> May 2024

Joint Select Committee,

Review of the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022

Dear Committee,

I make the following submission on behalf of the Curraweela Community which is located in the Upper Lachlan Shire of NSW.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> March 2023, the Curraweela community experienced a devastating bushfire which destroyed some 4,500 hectares, comprising of some 50 properties. One house was completely destroyed, and many other houses suffered extensive damage, making them inhabitable for months and up to six months, till they were repaired. Numerous outbuildings were destroyed, farm sheds, garages and fodder storage facilities. Some 1000 head of livestock were burnt to death or so severely burnt, they had to be euthanised in the days following. Those with stock that did survive had to sell them or seek agistment elsewhere as they had no fences or feed. Many items of plant and machinery were destroyed, tractors, farm implements, motor vehicles, trailers etc. Hundreds of kilometres of fences were destroyed. Thousands of trees bordering properties, roadsides and providing shelter belts and habitat for native animals were destroyed as the fire was so intense.

The NSW Reconstruction Authority (NSW RA) visited Curraweela in late March and convened a "Recovery Meeting" in the Taralga Memorial Hall some 17kms in distance from the fire scar. At that meeting, representatives of the NSW RA talked about the many forms of assistance they would provide. These ranged from low interest loans, counselling, rubbish removal and clean-up, replenishment of tank water supplies that were used for fire fighting and make safe works. They further advised they'd engage Blaze Aid to assist with rebuilding fences. We're to help you individually and we will help rebuild your community.

In April 2023, 2 teams comprising 3 – 4 staff members in each team visited the fire affected residents. They went from property to property to talk with owners and to gather information about the losses and inform their recovery efforts. A representative of the Federal Government Emergency Management Agency attended the property visits so that she could prepare her agency for the submission that would come from the State Government for disaster assistance.

It was the view of the senior NSW RA staff that the disaster was of significant scale to trigger Federal Government assistance. A report was written by senior NSW RA staff to be forwarded to the Federal Government.

The residents of Curraweela were informed that the following assistance would be provided:

- \$10,000 property owner grants to assist with the repairs and rebuilding of properties.

- \$75,000 primary producer grants to reestablish primary producer businesses and to assist with the replacement of fences and essential equipment.
- Blaze Aid – a volunteer organisation would be funded to assist with pulling down burnt fences and erecting new fences – labour component only – properties would have to purchase fence materials.
- Make safe works to repair infrastructure, the removal of dangerous trees and other items posing a risk.
- Removal of burnt debris on properties.
- Replenishment of farm water supplies which were used for firefighting purposes.
- Counselling services.
- Low interest loans.
- Financial counselling.

The report was due to go to Federal Government in April 2023, however on every occasion we inquired, we were informed that more edits were required and it would be sent shortly. These excuses continued for some months, all the time, assurance was given that the forms of assistance above would be flowing shortly. We were told on a few occasions, its not long now, another week or so, we will set up in the Taralga Community Hall and help the residents fill out the forms for the disaster payments. This never eventuated.

A resident who had lost her entire water supply for fire fighting purposes inquired on the night of the first recovery meeting in April for assistance in refilling her replacement water tanks as the fire destroyed her tanks. She was told that she would be phoned in the days following with arrangements. She inquired again after several weeks and was told to get a quote from a local water supplier. She arranged a quote and phoned to inform the NSW RA officer. He said that he would get approval and phone her back, he never phoned back. She complained in writing to NSW RA and was finally sent an “application form” in January 2024, some 10 months after the fire. She had already replenished her water supply at her own cost and in absolute disgust, did not seek reimbursement.

Other residents were told that NSW RA would remove burnt debris from their properties. After many months of waiting and no assistance was forthcoming, residents paid local contractors to remove the debris from their properties. Some residents were able to cart smaller amounts to the Upper Lachlan Shire Transfer station in many loads using their own and borrowed vehicles.

A Blaze Aid camp was funded and some properties were able to utilise the volunteer staff to pull down burnt fences and erect new fences. Property owners were to work with Blaze Aid and also fund the fencing material costs. The properties with burnt trees along fence lines, some bordering public roads, were told to hold off until the trees were removed. As of the date of writing this submission, those properties are still waiting for trees to be removed under the “Make Safe” works. Blaze Aid packed up in January 2023 and have not returned. The many properties with burnt trees will not get Blaze Aid assistance.

In August 2023, a senior NSW RA staff member visited Curraweela with an arborist, Riverina Tree Care, who were the same firm that assessed the burnt trees at Tumbarumba in 2020. Riverina Tree Care were engaged to remove the dangerous trees in Tumbarumba. We understand it was a cost of some \$5.5m funded by the NSW RA. The purpose of the Curraweela visit was to assess dangerous trees falling into the following categories:

- Trees on council and government lands (roadside verges) at risk of falling on roads and powerlines.
- Trees on private lands at risk of falling on roads and powerlines.
- Trees on private lands at risk of falling on dwellings.
- Trees on private lands at risk of falling on private infrastructure, water tanks, sheds, driveways to and from properties etc.

These works were covered under the make safe provisions and assurance was given that those works would be fully funded by the NSW RA.

Riverina Tree Care provided a report to the NSW RA in September of 2023 with a total cost of some \$1.3m to remove trees and treat the waste product.

NSW RA visited the Upper Lachlan Shire Council (ULSC) in September of 2023 and asked them to take on the work as a “service delivery” partner to the NSW Government. They were asked to engage Riverina Tree Care under emergency arrangements that were utilised in the Tumbarumba 2020 fire clean up. ULSC were told to go ahead and bill NSW RA under a cost recovery arrangement. ULSC asked for the assurances in writing that the works would be fully funded. They also asked for the emergency provisions which would enable them to bypass the required procurement processes. NSW RA staff said they would provide both lots of assurances. The written assurances never arrived. After many letters of complaint from September to December 2023, staff from NSW RA and Transport for NSW met with ULSC senior officials. Transport for NSW offered to fund \$640k of the \$1.3m leaving NSW RA to fund \$660k.

In January 2024, [REDACTED] wrote to the Curraweela community and advised that the Make Safe works on roads and private properties would be funded. She further confirmed that a Blaze Aid camp would be established to pull down fences for tree removal and erect fences when the trees were gone.

On behalf on the Curraweela community, I sought confirmation of [REDACTED] assurances from [REDACTED]. The request was simple – extract from the email exchange is below. I am happy to provide the entire email exchange should the committee wish to review it. The email exchange went on for days and I sought confirmation of the same issues many times. The responses lacked transparency and can best be described as unprofessional and evasive.

1. The arborist report quoted \$1.2m - \$1.3m for the removal of trees. In previous correspondence, you have indicated that Transport NSW will fund \$698k towards those works and the balance will come from the NSW Reconstruction Authority. Assuming the \$1.3m figure, can you please confirm that NSW Reconstruction Authority are providing \$602k to either the Upper Lachlan Shire Council or the Arborist directly ? Its important that the works are fully funded - can you please provide your confirmation that these funds have been provided.
2. Has contact been made with BlazeAid to secure their workforce to be available to remove and reinstate fences when the trees are felled ?
3. I understand the trees were going to the Divalls property on Craig Road. Can you please advise if there are costs associated and whether the funding will be made available to Divalls ?
4. Can you please advise whether there will be financial assistance for the purchase of fencing materials to reinstate the fences on the road reserves ?

[REDACTED] would not respond to the questions above. At one stage she indicated that Blaze Aid would be established to undertake the fence work, then at 4am the next morning, she emailed to advise that it would be funded from unused funds from the original camp. She had not checked that there were funds available, she later had her staff make inquiries which revealed there was less than \$4,000 available, clearly less than adequate. Since then, the offer made by [REDACTED] in January 2024 has been taken off the table. In discussions with ULSC and later confirmed by [REDACTED] NSW RA will only fund \$300k of the required \$660k to remove the trees. Where does this leave the Upper Lachlan Shire Council? They do not have the funds to contribute to these works. Which trees are to be felled and what happens to the trees that continue to fall on public roads after the funds have been exhausted.

The ULSC have since engaged an independent arborist to reassess the dangerous trees into the following three risk categories – High, Medium and Low risk. They have also gone to a panel of providers and asked them to submit cost estimates, but to look at what possible salvage costs could be part of the arrangements as many of the trees are radiata pine. ULSC have not been funded for their costs.

In relation to other forms of assistance, particularly the landowner and primary producer grants, I wrote to the NSW RA and Ministers asking for confirmation the grants would be made available to the community. I received a call from [REDACTED] in December 2023. [REDACTED] said I'm sorry, but the Curraweela fire does not meet the criteria to trigger Federal Emergency assistance. I responded advising him that his staff for the last 9 months have been telling us that it did, and that report would be sent to the Federal Government. [REDACTED] said the report could not go as the Curraweela fire did not meet the criteria. I asked [REDACTED] what the criteria were? [REDACTED] said I don't know exactly, but he thought it was something to do with the size of the fire in relation to the total area of the Upper Lachlan Shire. I said that is ridiculous and would not be the criteria. [REDACTED] said he did not know what the criteria were and he undertook to send them to me. He did not send me the criteria and I never heard from [REDACTED] again.

I have asked for the criteria required to trigger Disaster Relief Funding five times now and they have never been sent.

I wrote to [REDACTED] asking for assistance. [REDACTED] kindly responded that the Federal Government cannot trigger the disaster relief funding unless its been formally requested by the State Government. The State Government had not sent in a request for assistance.

In the period from 3<sup>rd</sup> of October to 2023 to December 2023, we were advised that things could not progress due to the South Coast bush fires. In conversations with NSW RA staff at the time, we were advised the South Coast bushfires were their priority as the Premier and Prime Minister have taken an interest in those fires. We will get back to you when we have some time. Calls weren't returned, Curraweela community was left hanging for months.

In [REDACTED] last correspondence on the 24<sup>th</sup> April 2024, again sent from a "No Reply" email address, she advises that Curraweela did not meet the criteria to trigger categories C & D under the DRFA, but fails to advise what the criteria are despite this being requested numerous times in previous correspondence.

In that same email she advises that the Tumbarumba fires in which some \$5.5m was provided for burnt tree removal and clean-up was of a significant scale to trigger assistance under the DRFA. What is the scale and what criteria have to be met, nobody from NSW RA will tell us.

A fire is a fire and the loss to each property owner can be same whether you're 1 property in 50 or 1 property in 500. Why is there no fairness and equity for every property that has suffered significant loss?

[REDACTED]

In the absence of the criteria to trigger the DRFA, which has been requested many times and not provided, we see no other difference. Perhaps if Curraweela had someone prominent living here, it would have triggered millions of dollars of assistance.

In summary, we have found the NSW Reconstruction Authority totally lacking in terms of responsiveness, fairness in approach and transparency. Staff members at the lower levels were passionate about providing assistance to the Curraweela community, but unfortunately the promised assistance was not provided.

We have found the Director of the Illawarra and South East NSW, unprofessional, lacking in empathy, unresponsive and inadequate in the role. This same director did not visit the fire scar in Taralga on the many visits undertaken by NSW RA staff. The closest she came was some 17kms from the fire in the Taralga Memorial Hall, early April 2023. We find it appalling that she could not make the effort to visit a major fire scar in her area of responsibility.

The many offers of assistance which weren't realised caused so much depression and anxiety amongst the fire affected residents in Curraweela. It is a cruel game to be playing with people that have lost so much.

If the NSW Reconstruction Authority cannot be made more responsive, fairer, effective and transparent in their dealings with disaster affected communities, we recommend that it be abolished immediately and save NSW taxpayer monies.

I am available to provide further information should the committee require it.

**Frank Startari on behalf of the Curraweela Community**



