



Submission: Inquiry into the ACT environment's bushfire preparedness

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About VolunteeringACT

Volunteering and Contact ACT Ltd (trading as VolunteeringACT) is the peak body for volunteering and provides community information services in the Canberra region. We also deliver programs for people experiencing disadvantage and isolation, people with disability, and people needing support for mental wellness. VolunteeringACT has a vision of an inclusive Canberra, and a mission to foster inclusion by enabling participation and connection.

VolunteeringACT values collaboration, diversity, equity, innovation, integrity, and participation. VolunteeringACT is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 189 members, advocates for and supports volunteers, and engages with the broader Canberra community. Through our activities, we improve inclusivity, enable sustainable volunteering, and create a more resilient Canberra community.

VolunteeringACT is part of the National Network of Volunteering Peak Bodies in Australia.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region and recognises any other peoples or families with connection to this Country. VolunteeringACT is committed to reconciliation and will continue to walk alongside First Nations Peoples and embrace the traditions, stories and wisdoms of the oldest continuing cultures in the world.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges volunteers of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live. We also acknowledge the contribution of the volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.

This submission has been made as part of our commitment to ensuring the perspectives and expertise of volunteers, VIOs and volunteer leaders informs development of public policy and contributes to achievement of positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes. The content has been informed by the experiences of organisations in our membership and networks.

Introduction

VolunteeringACT welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on the Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity's Inquiry into the ACT environment's bushfire preparedness (the Inquiry).

Volunteers are a vital and irreplaceable workforce in the ACT's environmental and emergency response sectors and make a significant contribution to bushfire risk mitigation all year round. It is essential the Inquiry recognises the critical role of volunteers, engages volunteer groups and volunteer managers as key stakeholders, and ensures that adequate funding and support structures are in place to support relevant volunteer programs.

We have provided a list of key recommendations for the Committee's consideration below, with further details provided on the following pages.

Recommendations

- 1. Clearly map, recognise, and acknowledge the contribution of volunteers to bushfire risk reduction in the ACT.**
- 2. Engage the volunteering ecosystem as a key stakeholder in the Inquiry and examine their contribution to bushfire preparedness, the challenges facing them and their support needs.**
- 3. Call for the ACT government to provide increased, sustainable, and consistent funding of volunteer programs as a core, ongoing component of bushfire preparedness.**

ACT Volunteers and bushfire risk reduction

ACT volunteers provide essential bushfire risk reduction activities across the ACT all year round. These activities include weed reduction, clearing of waterways, removing debris and leaf litter, assisting with prescribed burns, monitoring and recording data, and providing valuable advice on environmental management. There are two key sub-groups of volunteers that contribute to the bushfire preparedness of the ACT and surrounds – environmental volunteers and emergency services volunteers.

Environmental volunteers

The ACT environmental volunteering ecosystem is a large and inter-connected community of various self-governed, independent groups, all contributing to the ACT landscape's climate resilience. There are around 100 environmental volunteer groups in the ACT, incorporating Landcare, ParkCare and Urban Parks and Places programs and thematic groups such as Friends of Grasslands.¹ The relationships between these groups are complex and the government responsibility for the land that the different groups work on varies between the Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate (TCCS), and the Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD).² A detailed description of the environmental volunteering ecosystem is available in the recent ACT Environmental Volunteers Report.³

The contribution of ACT environmental volunteers is both critical and irreplaceable. As recognised in the ACT government's inquiry into environmental volunteerism in 2022, *"Volunteers contribute work and expertise to land management and environmental efforts to an extent that would not otherwise be possible due to budgetary and other constraints."*⁴ Recent data suggests that environmental volunteers provide over 300,000 hours of work each year which is equivalent to a wage saving for the ACT government of over \$21.5 million per annum.⁵

Weed control and removal is an important aspect of bushfire risk reduction. As weather conditions change due to climate change and activities such as prescribed burning become more challenging, mitigation measures like weed control become increasingly important. Parkcare, Landcare and Urban Parks and Places volunteers in the ACT carry out significant weed control activities. The ACT invasive plants operations dashboard indicates that in

¹ Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory (2022) [ACT Inquiry into environmental volunteerism](#), p2

² Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment (OSCE) (2022) [ACT Environmental Volunteers Report](#), 02. *The ACT Volunteering ecosystem*

³ Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment (OSCE) (2022) [ACT Environmental Volunteers Report](#), 02. *The ACT Volunteering ecosystem*

⁴ Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory (2022) [ACT Inquiry into environmental volunteerism](#), p7

⁵ OCSE (2022) [ACT Environmental Volunteers Report](#), 07. *Values of volunteering in the ACT – Equivalent Wage Value*

2022-23, volunteers were responsible for at least 566 hectares of weed control work across the ACT, which is likely an underestimate as this figure relies on volunteers to input data.⁶

Controlling certain invasive species is an important element of this work. For example, African Love Grass is an invasive weed that is widespread in the ACT and highly combustible.

Volunteers make a significant contribution to controlling this weed and in 2022-23 they were responsible for eliminating it across at least 8.24 hectares of ACT land.⁷

Many environmental volunteers also bring invaluable skills, knowledge, and experience to their roles. While the ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) (within the EPSDD) experiences regular turnover of paid staff - including rangers, many ACT environmental volunteers have been working on ACT reserves for over 20 years and have comprehensive, in-depth knowledge of the local flora and fauna. PCS has told VolunteeringACT that new park rangers will often meet with volunteer groups to be shown around reserves as these groups are considered the local experts. Environmental volunteers also often act as an extension of government rangers, being the first to report problems and matters of concern, such as weed incursions.⁸ Many volunteers in this sub-sector also come from highly relevant professional backgrounds (e.g. CSIRO scientists, ex-firefighters), and bring extensive knowledge and experience related to bushfire risk to their roles.

Prescribed burns are another important element of bushfire risk reduction in the ACT. PCS has told VolunteeringACT that they include the input of environmental volunteers to inform prescribed burn plans. For example, volunteers are well placed to advise the PCS on assets (such as endangered species or habitats) that exist on a reserve and need to be protected.

Emergency Services volunteers

The ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) is based within the Justice and Community Safety (JACS) directorate and manages emergency services volunteers, incorporating Rural Fire Service (RFS) and State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers. All these volunteers play key roles not only in bushfire response, but also in the ACT environment's bushfire preparedness activities throughout the year. Data from 2023 indicates that there are 1,566 volunteers with the ESA in the ACT, incorporating 473 RFS volunteers, 385 SES volunteers and 643 Community Fire Unit volunteers.⁹ Part of the role of these volunteers is to contribute to

⁶ ACT Government (2023) [2022-23 Operations Dashboard – invasive plants](#)

⁷ ACT Government (2023) [2022-23 Operations Dashboard – invasive plants](#)

⁸ Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory (2022) [ACT Inquiry into environmental volunteerism](#), p8

⁹ Justice and Community Safety Directorate (2023) [JACS Annual Report 2023](#), p173

bushfire preparedness through prescribed burns, removal of fallen trees and debris, and being ready to respond quickly and effectively to relevant incidents.

Prescribed burns are an important land management technique used by the ACT government to reduce fuel loads. The ACT RFS (including volunteers) works with rural land holders, and the PCS, to conduct prescribed burns and manage fuel loads.¹⁰

The ACT environment's bushfire preparedness also needs to be considered in the context of the ACT bushfire response and readiness more broadly, which includes consideration of bushfire response and social recovery. ESA volunteers are critical across all aspects of this response and are an irreplaceable element of ACT bushfire risk reduction, response, and recovery.

Volunteer recognition and respect

This Inquiry presents an opportunity to highlight, recognise and support the contribution of volunteers to protecting the ACT community from bushfires. Currently there is a widespread lack of understanding, respect and recognition for the critical work undertaken by the hundreds of environmental and emergency services volunteers who are active throughout the year. The recent Inquiry into environmental volunteerism reported that while there is some acknowledgement of volunteers' contributions in certain government documents and platforms, this is inconsistent and often cursory, with some volunteers reporting that their contributions are taken for granted.¹¹

If we continue to take volunteers for granted or ask for too much from them without adequate supports in place, this can lead to burnout and high turnover, which in turn will greatly reduce overall effectiveness of ACT's bushfire preparedness. The volunteering ecosystem must be engaged as key stakeholders in this Inquiry and the Committee must examine and consider the essential role that volunteers play in this space and how this can be better supported, recognised, and resourced.

Recommendations:

- 1. Clearly map, recognise, and acknowledge the contribution of volunteers to bushfire risk reduction in the ACT.**

¹⁰ ACT Emergency Services Agency (2024) [Bushfire Operations](#)

¹¹ Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory (2022) [ACT Inquiry into environmental volunteerism](#), p23

- 2. Engage the volunteering ecosystem as a key stakeholder in the Inquiry and examine their contribution to bushfire preparedness, the challenges they are facing, and their support needs.**

Volunteer resourcing

The heavy reliance on ACT environmental and emergency services volunteers in reducing bushfire risk must also be met with adequate investment and resourcing.

While volunteers offer their time for free, there are costs associated with running volunteer programs and they require adequate funding to ensure their viability. Volunteers require training, onboarding, and ongoing line management to ensure their volunteering experience is ethical, safe, inclusive, and in line with the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement (currently being refreshed).¹² It is vital that programs are run in this way, as this ensures they are sustainable and deliver high quality outcomes.

Current levels of funding for both environmental and emergency services volunteer programs/management are simply not adequate and do not reflect the criticality of the volunteering workforce component of bushfire preparedness.

For example, while around two thirds of the ESA workforce is comprised of volunteer members, this percentage is not reflected through allocation of funding in the ACT ESA Budget. Emergency volunteers require more specialised training and have higher exposure to risk than most volunteers in other sectors. It follows that there are significant costs associated with operating emergency volunteering programs, including management, ongoing training, support and debriefing, and they require adequate funding to ensure their viability and that emergency volunteer experiences are ethical, safe and inclusive. A lack of funding for volunteer programs can also impact on volunteer retention and attraction, which is concerning given the increasing need for volunteers in this space and the decline in formal volunteer numbers being experienced across the country.¹²

There is also significant inconsistency in volunteer program funding across different government directorates. For example, while PCS do receive funding for their volunteer programs (including ParkCare), this only covers core training and tools. It does not provide any resourcing or capacity for ongoing development of key resources and promotional activities, which is concerning given the aging population and the need to attract more young people to environmental volunteering. Meanwhile, TCCS do not receive any budget allocation, outside of

¹² Volunteering Australia (2023) [National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-33](#), p21

one support officer and one grants officer, with a small grants program, for their urban parks volunteer programs, which is an unacceptable gap. While PCS can afford to offer training for their volunteers, TCCS can only offer spare spots in existing training courses where available, take money out of maintenance programs, or fund them through the grants program.

Volunteer programs provide significant return on investment. Recent data collected as part of the ACT's 2023 State of Volunteering Survey has shown that for every \$1 invested in volunteering, \$5.80 is returned.¹³ Even small investments in recognition and retention of volunteers— such as providing lunches when out of shifts or T-shirts, can have a significant impact and help to ensure that volunteers are not left out-of-pocket. In the ACT, we have recently heard from rural fire services staff that while the paid staff members undertaking similar functions have their protective clothing laundered professionally for them, volunteers are expected to take their protective clothing home and wash it themselves at their own expense. This not only leaves them out of pocket, but also potentially exposes them to carcinogens that may remain on their clothing after exposure to fire. This is not conducive to a safe, supportive, and ethical volunteering experience. Similarly, we have heard reports of volunteers needing to buy their own lunches whilst on a volunteering shift, (where paid staff are provided free lunches).

The ACT community relies on volunteers to care for our landscape and help protect us from the threat of bushfire. It is critical that in return we ensure they are well supported, properly recognised and valued for their contributions, and never left out-of-pocket as a result of their volunteer participation.

Recommendation:

- 3. Call for the ACT government to provide increased, sustainable, and consistent funding of volunteer programs as a critical element of bushfire preparedness.**

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of VolunteeringACT.

Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer

¹³ ACT State of Volunteering Research 2023 – report due for publication March 2024