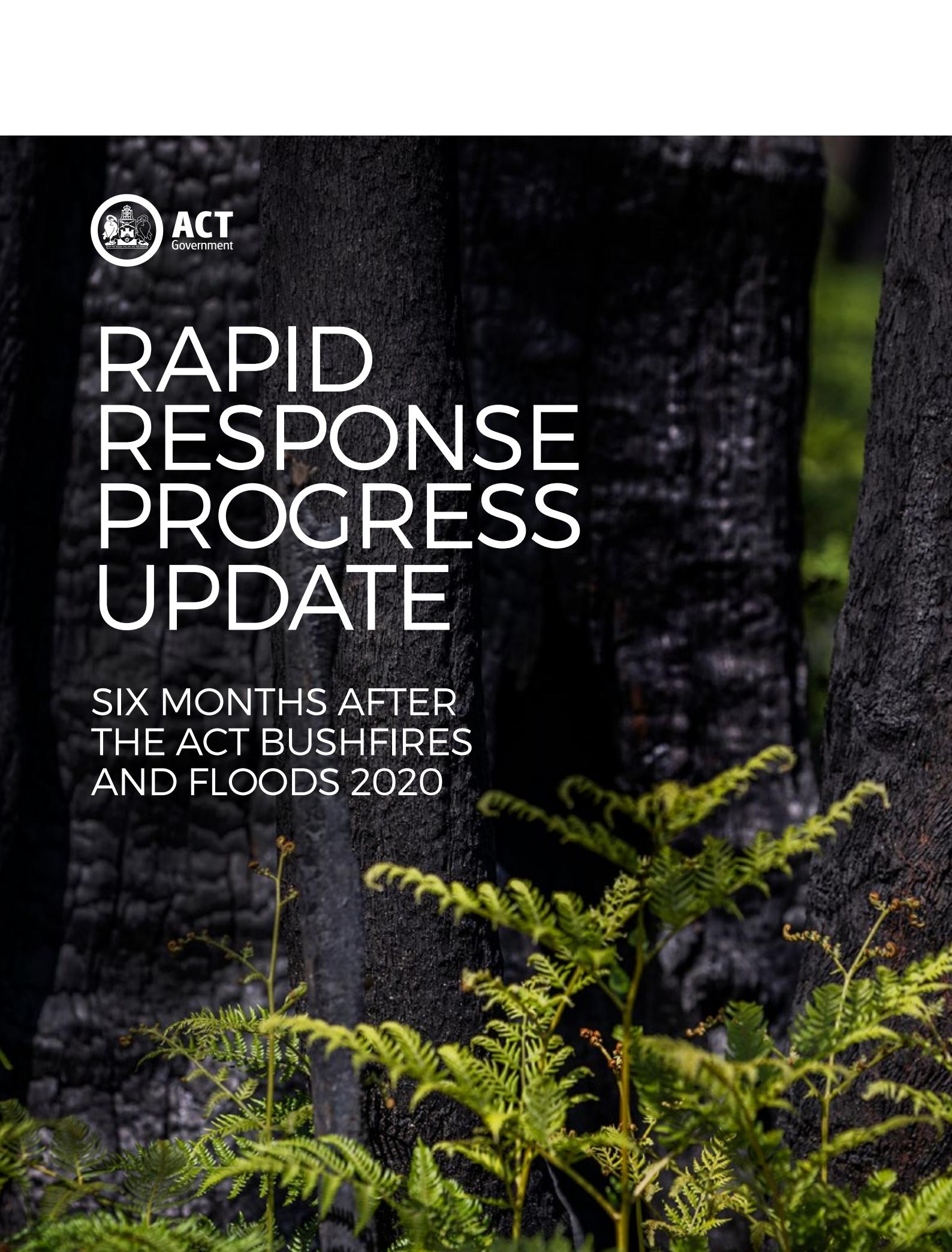




# RAPID RESPONSE PROGRESS UPDATE

SIX MONTHS AFTER  
THE ACT BUSHFIRES  
AND FLOODS 2020



### **Acknowledgement of Country**

The ACT Government acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the ACT, the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the unique contribution they make to the life of this area.

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Director-General, Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, ACT Government, GPO Box 158, Canberra ACT 2601.

**Telephone:** 02 6207 1923

**Website:** [www.environment.act.gov.au](http://www.environment.act.gov.au)

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Photography: Richard Poulton



# FOREWORD FROM THE MINISTER

## Mick Gentleman MLA

Nearly six months on from the summer's severe bushfires and floods, the ACT Government has responded to the most immediate threats in impacted areas of Namadgi National Park, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and rural lands.

The COVID-19 health emergency presents many challenges to ongoing recovery efforts and the broader Canberra community. To deliver jobs, support local businesses and help the environment, the ACT Government has worked with industry to repair and replace 19 kilometres of rural land fences damaged in the bushfires as part of our fast-track infrastructure program.

Recovery efforts have also been supported through the creation of 26 temporary ranger and field officer positions through the Jobs for Canberrans COVID-19 stimulus project to repair walking trails and undertake critical restoration work in the Lower Cotter Catchment.

The ACT's Traditional Custodians, the Ngunnawal people, have a profound cultural and spiritual connection to the fire and flood impacted areas as well as the broader region. Since the fires, a series of on-Country yarns with the Ngunnawal community and Representative Aboriginal Organisations have been held, and members of the community have been actively engaged in ongoing assessments of impacted heritage places and objects.

Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and much of our rural lands, are still recovering from the extreme dry conditions experienced over the last couple of years and face increased pressures in response to significant changes in our climate.

However, our initial steps to recovery have placed the ACT in a strong position to develop a long-term response to bushfire impacts.

The ACT Government will continue to engage Canberra's communities in the recovery journey, including working with our Traditional Custodians, volunteers and volunteer organisations.

Green shoots of recovery can be seen across the 88,000 hectares of land that was burnt and people can once again return to some of their favourite places in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Namadgi National Park.

We will continue to work towards reopening the remaining areas of Namadgi.

I would like to thank the ACT community for their ongoing patience as we work to make the park safe once again. I look forward to continuing the recovery journey with the community as they begin to re-discover these areas.





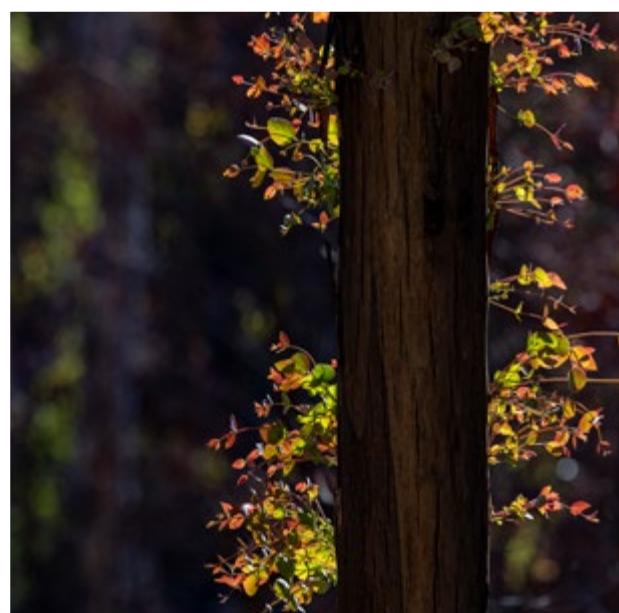
# INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, Canberraans witnessed and endured the impacts of two major fires, which burnt approximately 88,000 hectares of national park, ACT rural and Commonwealth land.

Shortly after these events, the ACT and region also received significant rainfall causing widespread flooding, throughout the fireground. The fires and floods damaged and destroyed major infrastructure impacting fences, visitor amenities and public access roads. They also impacted the landscapes' cultural values, heritage places and objects, water quality, and ecosystem functions. Rural landholders and farmers in areas adjoining Namadgi National Park were also significantly affected by the fires.

The full extent of impacts to the burnt areas are still unknown due to restricted access, time and seasonal constraints and the ongoing response to COVID 19.

Six months on and our burnt landscape is beginning to heal through natural and assisted processes. The purpose of this Rapid Response Update is to provide the Canberra community with information on our immediate response to last summer's extreme weather. The Update also marks the transition from the ACT Government's early response to the bushfire and flood impacts, to the development and implementation of a long-term recovery response.







# BACKGROUND

The Orroral Valley fire began on 27 January 2020 and burnt more than 80% of Namadgi National Park (Namadgi) and over 20% of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve (Tidbinbilla). The fire also impacted the Cotter River catchment, the ACT and Queanbeyan's primary water supply.

The smaller Beard fire began in Pialligo Redwood Park on 20 January and was contained and suppressed over 6 days, burning 424 ha.

The ACT and region also received significant rainfall during February causing widespread flooding, throughout the Orroral Valley fireground. This mobilised large amounts of sediment and ash throughout the landscape which subsequently impacted water quality from the catchment.

A Rapid Risk Assessment was undertaken over seven days in February to identify immediate recovery priorities. [A Rapid Risk Assessment Team Report](#) (RRAT Report) was developed to guide both the initial response and ongoing recovery planning and delivery efforts.

Nationally, Australia was severely impacted by bushfires throughout the 2019-2020 season. The Commonwealth Government responded by activating a Bushfire Recovery Agency, including Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.



# RECOVERY EFFORTS SO FAR

The Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD) through the ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) is leading recovery planning and delivery, with a suite of programs and recovery projects.

Recovery efforts in the ACT have ebbed and flowed within the unique scenario and challenges of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which has impacted on our community, staff and day-to-day operations.

Rapid actions undertaken on-ground over the last six months have included Commonwealth liaison, cross-directorate ACT Government response and community and stakeholder engagement. Most of these actions have been completed.

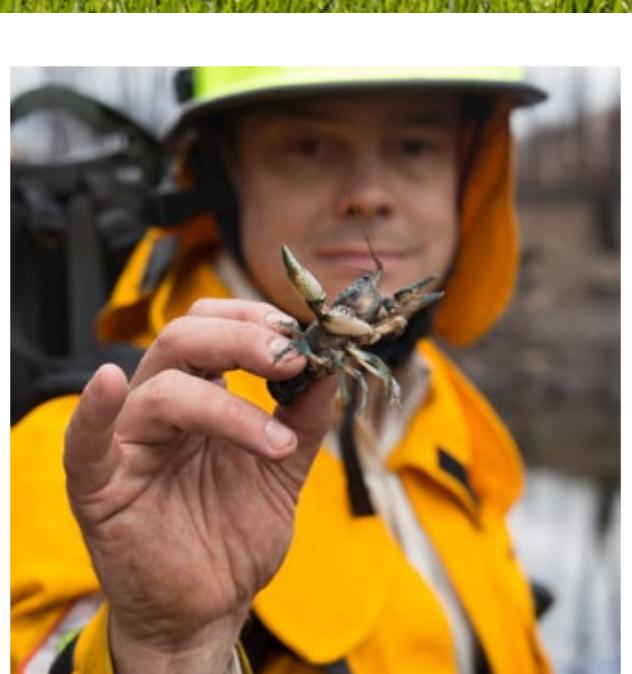
Collectively these achievements will drive the recovery efforts beyond the immediate response and into the next stage of the recovery process. This next stage (3 months – 3 years) involves a long-term response considering broader ecosystem trends and drivers like climate change and safeguarding the ACT's water supply. In the coming months, the Government will release a comprehensive plan to recover the park.

RESPOND	STABILISE		RECOVERY
Bushfire Emergency Response	Rapid Risk Assessment	Initial Response and Recovery Program Development	Long Term Recovery Program Delivery
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Manage incident</li><li>» Safely put out bushfire</li></ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Complete fire severity mapping</li><li>» Conduct initial impact assessment</li><li>» Conduct risk assessment</li></ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Initial recovery response responding to risk assessment recommendations</li></ul>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» Enable the recovery of impacted areas including natural, cultural values and infrastructure in Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve</li></ul>



# RECOVERY THEMES

Recovery work to date has been categorised into four themes – Environment, Heritage, Assets, and Agriculture.



## Environment

Natural regeneration is already resulting in considerable epicormic growth (regrowth of leaves from the trunks of burned trees) and revegetation through the majority of Namadgi National Park.

Actions to support our natural environment's recovery have so far centred on monitoring threatened species and ecosystems, biosecurity issues, managing erosion, and protecting water quality.

Some examples of work undertaken by our conservation ecologists to support threatened species and ecosystems includes population surveys for Montane Spiny Crayfish and Greater Gliders, restoration work on Bogs and Fens (Case Study 2), and catchment restoration.

At Tidbinbilla, staff have been working with wildlife institutions and sanctuaries to care for and safely return its Brush-tailed Rock-wallabies, Koalas, Platypus, and Northern Corroboree Frogs back to the ACT. The animals were evacuated from Tidbinbilla to escape the encroaching Orroral Valley bushfire. Protecting these animals allows Tidbinbilla to continue its work to restore and safeguard threatened species and other endangered populations – work that is sorely needed following the bushfires across Australia.

Biosecurity threats are being addressed with priority invasive weed species targeted and treated in and around Namadgi and Beard. A feral deer monitoring program has also been established in the upper

sections of the Cotter Catchment. This work is supported by ongoing operational vertebrate pest and weed control programs in Namadgi such as the pig control program and English Broom control.

Approximately 500 ha in Namadgi National Park has been managed for invasive weeds, including St John's wort, African lovegrass, blackberry, black willow, nodding thistle, woody weeds, and Chilean needle grass among others. Weed control has also been undertaken across 217 ha in Beard.

At the catchment level, ICON Water undertook prioritised sediment control works within Cotter and Bendora dams. Various sediment control and filtering instruments were installed to manage debris and help achieve immediate water security for the ACT and Queanbeyan.



## Heritage

Early assessments of the Park's rich Ngunnawal culture indicate that there were minimal impacts to art sites, stone arrangements and artefact sites, although some sites have not yet been inspected due to their remote location. EPSDD ACT PCS and ACT Heritage is working actively with the Ngunnawal community to ensure their ongoing protection, and to survey the more inaccessible sites.

Heritage achievements have focused on cultural engagements, including an on-Country yarn with Representative Aboriginal Organisations and the Ngunnawal community. Heritage specialists have also been engaged to assess earthworks impacts and fire impacts to European and Aboriginal cultural sites.

This work has been assisted with the creation of five temporary Ngunnawal ranger positions within ACT Parks and Conservation Service. These positions were funded under the Jobs for Canberrans initiative to support Canberra workers who are impacted by the COVID-19 health emergency. The new rangers have worked to Care for Country and assist with bushfire recovery work including supporting the protection of cultural heritage. The specialist assessments will guide additional management needs and be considered as part of the next stage of the recovery efforts. Specifically, the earthworks assessments will enable the rehabilitation of earthworks undertaken during fire suppression activities.



## Assets

Rapid assessment has been widespread and continuous. For example, over 300 staff days of tree assessments have been undertaken with dangerous fire-impacted trees removed from over 130km of roads, fire trails and walking tracks. This work has concluded and trees will be continuously monitored by staff over time and dealt with as the need arises.

In Namadgi National Park, work has been underway to conduct detailed post fire condition assessments of walking tracks, public roads and other visitor infrastructure. This is the first step in recovery planning to establish what work is needed to return the assets to a good condition. Detailed planning of required works is underway.

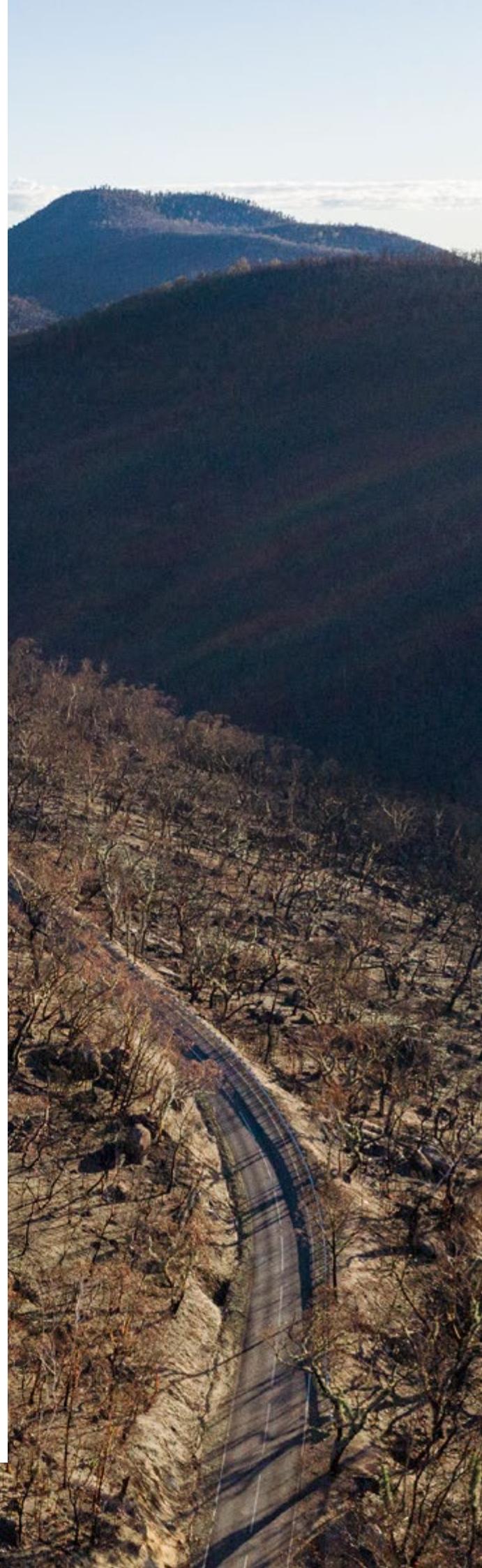
Efforts to restore tracks and trails in Namadgi National Park have been supported with the creation of 26 temporary rangers and field officer positions through the Jobs for Canberraans COVID-19 stimulus project. This work includes conducting rapid actions to make walking tracks safe and enable facilities to be reopened in the short term with final recovery occurring over the course of the program.

Restoring better, more resilient visitor infrastructure, including picnic areas, car parks, signage, walking tracks, will be undertaken progressively over time as part of the long-term recovery response and on a case by case basis. We do not expect this work to delay areas of Namadgi National Park being opened in most cases.

Transport Canberra and City Services (TCCS) have been working through extensive road rehabilitation to work toward reopening Namadgi to the community.

Tidbinbilla was hit by a flash flood in the days immediately following the bushfires. This flood flattened 300 metres of predator proof fence, destroyed several floodgates and caused some minor damage in the Sanctuary. Work to repair and restore visitor and wildlife infrastructure is now complete, which allowed for the reopening of Tidbinbilla in May.

The team also took advantage of the closures to upgrade the Visitor Information Centre and public Koala display.



# Agriculture

Rural engagement has been ongoing following the Orroral Valley bushfire. A town meeting in Tharwa was held to determine immediate community needs and stimulate emergency asset repairs. Contracts and works are now complete as part of the ACT Government's [Fast Track Program](#) stimulus package, with works focusing on the Namadgi and rural land boundary. This initial stimulus program replaced around 19 km of fencing, repaired 14 km of roads, cleared overhanging or fallen trees from 8 km of fencing, and repaired 8 floodgates. This work was completed in two months by contractors operating in often remote and difficult terrain. Further fence work has also been completed on the Beard fireground.

Engagement with rural landholders impacted by the fires has been regular and wide-ranging. This has seen the use of Emergency Relief Grants with regards to livestock and feed.





## NEXT STEPS

There is no single indicator or point in time that will determine when the environment, including rural lands, has recovered. Namadgi, Tidbinbilla and much of our rural lands are still recovering from the impacts of the 2003 fires and continue to change in response to changes in our climate.

The 2020 fires were greatly influenced by a preceding long and dry period that led to unprecedented fuel levels and uncommon fire behaviour characteristics. Three years from now, we will have responded to the most immediate threats facing fire impacted areas and a better understanding of the ongoing impacts of climate change on natural recovery processes.

Following the initial recovery work and rapid response actions undertaken over the last six months, the ACT Government is preparing a three-year Bushfire Recovery Plan. The Plan will include a suite of projects that address and respond to identified threats and restore Namadgi National Park's visitor attractions. The ACT Government will continue to engage Canberra's communities in all aspects of recovery, including through working with volunteers.

Canberra's volunteer organisations and volunteer community spend thousands of hours every year helping ACT Parks and Conservation Service manage parks and reserves. The expertise, capacity and

commitment of our volunteers is highly valued, and their return to Namadgi will help expand our efforts across all recovery aspects from weeding to environmental monitoring. The ParkCare hub now includes a Bushfire Recovery portal for volunteers. The ACT Government is also working with key volunteer organisations to coordinate recovery actions and capitalise on their ability to bring communities together and work towards a common goal.

Both the northern and southern areas of Namadgi have now been opened including Northern Namadgi, Corin, and Naas/Boboyan Road precincts. ACT Parks and Conservation Service is working with Roads ACT to progressively open the remaining areas of Namadgi to the public as soon as it is safe and practical to do so.

For more information on bushfire recovery in the ACT including information on what is open in Namadgi, visit [www.environment.act.gov.au/bushfire-recovery-2020](http://www.environment.act.gov.au/bushfire-recovery-2020).

