



**Community Listening Report on Adaptation to
Climate Crises:**

The Extreme Summer of 2019/20



Introduction

The summer of 2019/20 was unprecedented in many ways for Australia, and for its capital city, Canberra, in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).

Fuelled in part by record-breaking heat and drought, the 2019/20 bushfire season was the worst on record for New South Wales (NSW) in terms of the scale of the bushfires, the number of properties lost, and the amount of area burned¹. In many aspects, the fires fell outside of what might be considered “normal”.² Nearly all Australians, about 80% according to one published study³, were affected in one way or another. At least 1 billion animals perished, 800 million in NSW alone⁴.

Ringed by NSW fires for much of the season, Canberra experienced extreme and long-lasting periods of appalling air quality due to smoke. On New Year’s Day, Canberra’s air quality was the worst of any city in the world, 23 times the threshold considered to be hazardous⁵. The prolonged smoke in the ACT was often contemporaneous with record breaking heat and the threat (or reality) of fire in the Territory itself. On 2 January 2020, the ACT declared a state of alert that was extended and later upgraded to a state of emergency. Extreme weather of another sort followed on 20 January 2020 when Canberra experienced a severe hailstorm with golf ball-sized hail and high winds that resulted in a record number of calls to an already stressed ACT Emergency Services Agency – 1,900 in just 8 hours⁶.

The ACT Climate Change Council⁷ met twice in early January 2020 to discuss how its remit was related to the local emergency. As extreme weather in general, including the 2019/20 Australian bushfire season particularly⁸, is substantially fuelled by worsening climate change, the Council undertook to study the summer of 2019/20 through the experiences of Canberra citizens and the expertise of various discipline specialists. The goal is to learn from this horrific summer in ways that can improve preparedness to both anticipated and unanticipated future climate-related shocks.

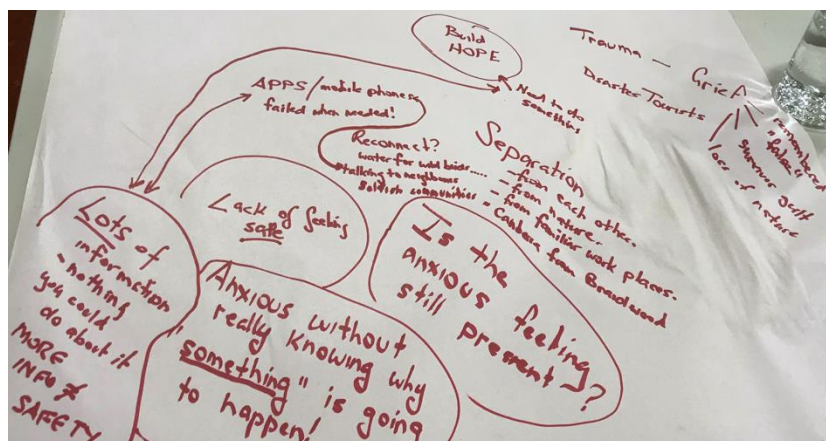
Announcing its intent in the local newspaper⁹ and via twitter and Facebook, the Council scheduled three community conversations, lasting from 7 to 9pm in each location.

- Tuggeranong Community Centre, 5 March 2020,
- Dickson College, 11 March 2020, and
- Palmerston Community Centre, 13 March 2020.



Participation was purely voluntary. Some contributions were received by email to the Council Secretariat at climatechangecouncilsecretariat@act.gov.au. The sessions began with brief individual written responses to set questions, followed by open community in-the-round discussions. Altogether, about 50 Canberrans shared their experiences and views with the Council. Notetakers recorded the discussions, and individual written comments were collected at the end of each evening.

This listening report summarises what the Council heard.



Health, Well-being and Frame of Mind

Every community conversation described strong negative impacts of the 2019/20 summer on individual and community health, well-being, and frame of mind. These included:

- Fear, uncertainty, a sense of foreboding, trauma, feeling unsafe or that nowhere is safe.
- Feeling that climate change has arrived. “We thought we had more time.” World will not be the same.
- Anger and frustration at national inaction on climate change. Lack of clarity about ACT climate action and/or belief that it is being pursued strongly enough given declared “climate emergency.”
- Dread and panic of parents for babies and children affected and the new world they face.
- Feeling of isolation from others, cabin-fever, disconnect with nature, the sky, fresh air.
- Inability to take exercise due to the extended smoke and heat.
- Difficulty in caring for children who could not play outside and experienced smoke and heat even inside.

- Comparisons to the 2003 fires. Those in 2019/20 were longer and associated with more uncertainty.
- Deep traumatic sorrow about loss of wildlife, feeling that the bush will never be the same.
- Concern that the 2019/20 fires will be “forgotten” when summer has passed.
- Exhaustion and stress created by compounded crises.

Availability and Quality of Information

Access to immediate, high-quality and appropriate information was described as vital to making accurate decisions in a crisis, and reducing fear of the unknown. It was noted that:

- Vital internet and telephone communication were not always available (especially on the coast).
- The quality of fire information, maps, apps such as Fires Near Me, were considered quite improved compared to those available during Canberra fires of 2003.
- Smoke and air quality information, however, was often inadequate in terms of frequency and spatial resolution.
- Admiration and appreciation were expressed for the ACT ESA and Commissioner Whelan.
- Valuable first-hand citizen information could be better coordinated with RFS and ESA.
- A need for culturally/linguistically appropriate information using community organisations was expressed.
- Road closure information was not always available on time scales needed in fast-moving situations associated with bushfires on the urban fringe.
- Some angst was caused when information of a seriously threatening nature was delivered without suggestions about what the listeners could do in response to the threat.

The Importance of Community

Repeatedly, the Council heard that a strong, connected community was crucial to adapting to and being resilient in the face of crises. The desire to be more actively engaged during a prolonged crisis, and be given the means to do so, was expressed, stressing that:

- Information can overwhelm unless accompanied by empowering people to act and assist
- Better use could be made of community organisations; set plans in place now for future.
- Government could facilitate and coordinate community assistance in crisis and recovery.
- Children and young people should be assisted to engage more.
- People could to be trained to be volunteers of different sorts (fire-fighting, translation services, emergency food delivery or lodging, restoring damaged ecosystems, rescuing wildlife, social check-ins with the vulnerable); start that training now.
- Grief and trauma need to be shared with others, and a diversity of mental health support must be available.

The Built Environment

The community expressed a need for improved, climate-wise built environment, both in new and used stock, with a desire for ACT leadership. They felt that:

- Planning and new build in the ACT is not of high enough standard for changing climate.
- Existing construction standards (both for design and for workmanship) are inadequate, as may be enforcement of the Building Code.
- The ACT should lead on building codes, making them suitable for our region, including with respect to ventilation systems in the presence of smoke for rental and owned stock.
- There is an immediate need for better building standards for schools, day-care centres, and health centres.
- The “leakiness” of all buildings should be accessed. Are we safer at work or at home? Home or at school?
- Some ventilation systems and evaporative cooling systems may not be appropriate for the ACT, given that they offer no protection against bushfire smoke. Is retrofitting of filters a feasible option?

- Community buildings could be put to better use in future crises, especially for use as smoke and heat refuges, with information about such a plan disseminated in advance.

Other Infrastructure

Infrastructure, both soft and hard, natural and built was severely stretched and overburdened by the multiple events of the summer of 2019/20. The community expressed several ways that such infrastructure might be altered to improve climate resilience. Views included:

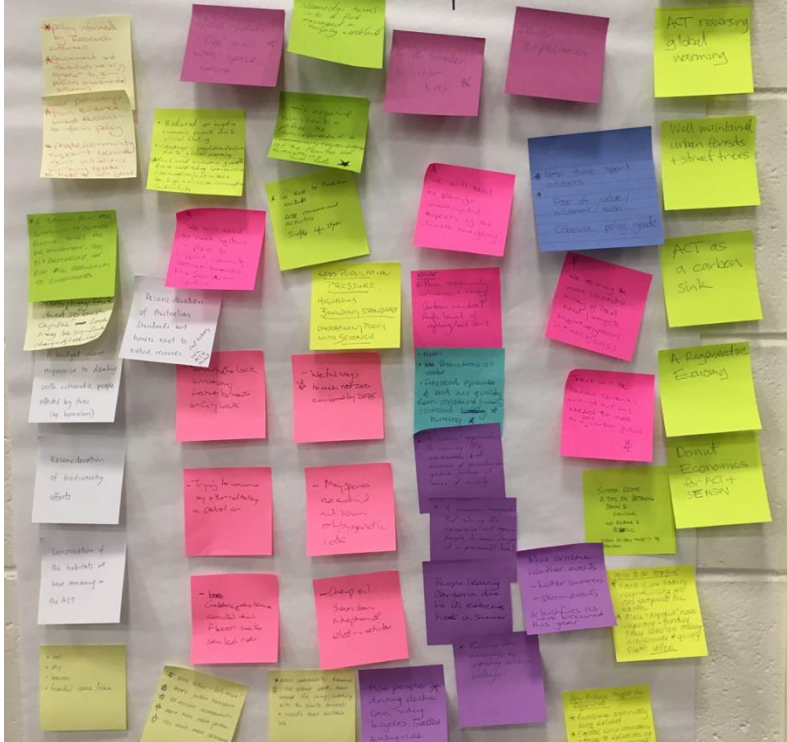
- If public transport cost less, more people would ride.
- A backup is needed for internet or other communication failures.
- Underground power lines could decrease power outage risks.
- Concern that current and proposed policies will not deliver the targeted ACT green canopy coverage. Some see tree-cover going “backwards” in new treeless suburbs and large apartment buildings lacking in natural shade.
- Changes are required to parks and wild areas to ease access and fire-fighting, and to ensure that new stock is climate resilient.
- Fire protection zones should be updated with freely-available information about implications for owners and tenants.
- The need to balance fuel reduction burning with habitat maintenance. What can we learn from indigenous practices that would be useful in the ACT?

What's Next?

The ACT Climate Change Council is deeply grateful for the engagement of the ACT community in March 2020.

Council is now actively reviewing a broad scope of expert advice into the causes, consequences and learnings associated with the climate-fueled crises of summer 2019/20 in the ACT. Combined with information gained from the community conversations, a report with recommendations will be crafted and delivered by the Council to the ACT Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability in mid-2020.

A different future



Notes

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- ¹ Hughes, L., Steffen, W., Mullins, G., Dean, A. Weisbrot, E. and Rice, M (2020) *The Summer of Crisis*. Published by the Climate Council of Australia Ltd. Accessed at: <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/summer-of-crisis>
- ² <https://theconversation.com/some-say-weve-seen-bushfires-worse-than-this-before-but-theyre-ignoring-a-few-key-facts-129391>
- ³ Biddle N, Edwards B, Herz D, and Makkai T (2020) Exposure and the impact on attitudes of the 2019-20 Australian Bushfires. ANU Centre for Social Research Methods. Accessed at: https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/2/Exposure_and_impact_on_attitudes_of_the_2019-20_Australian_Bushfires_publication.pdf
- ⁴ University of Sydney (2020) More than one billion animals killed in Australian bushfires. Accessed at: <https://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2020/01/08/australian-bushfires-more-than-one-billion-animals-impacted.html>.
- ⁵ SBS News (1 January 2020) Accessed at <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/canberra-s-air-quality-is-the-worst-in-the-world-as-bushfire-smoke-shrouds-capital>
- ⁶ Canberra Times (2020) Canberra hailstorm: Largest and most dense hailstones since 1999, more than 37,000 claims made. Accessed at: <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6636982/canberra-hailstones-the-largest-most-dense-since-1999/>.
- ⁷ The Council was established in law in 2011 to advise the ACT Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability on matters relating to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and building resilience and adapting to climate change.
- ⁸ See: www.worldweatherattribution.org/bushfires-in-australia-2019-2020. Details can be found in G.J. van Oldenborgh, et al. Attribution of the Australian bushfire risk to anthropogenic climate change. *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.5194/nhess-2020-69>
- ⁹ Canberra Times (22 January 2020) Climate affects us all: ACT's climate council responds to the climate emergency, Accessed at: <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6590464/climate-affects-us-all-acts-climate-council-responds-to-the-climate-emergency/>

Community Listening Report on Adaptation to Climate Crises: The Extreme Summer of 2019/20, a report of the ACT Climate Change Council, 4 May 2020.