



EMBARGO: 5.00PM

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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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ELECTORATE TALK

The bushfires which have swept through South Australia and Victoria are the worst Australia has ever known. Over 70 people have lost their lives and around 2,000 homes have been burnt to the ground. The fires have destroyed the livelihoods of many Australian families and I know every Australian joins with me in extending their deepest sympathy to those who have lost friends and relations in the fires, and to those whose homes and possessions have been destroyed.

The thousands of firefighters who have fought the fires with great determination and bravery deserve our greatest praise, and thanks - without them the devastation would have been immeasurably worse. The police, the services, and thousands of voluntary workers have done a wonderful job in backing up the firefighters and in providing relief from immediate hardship. They too deserve our thanks. Tens of thousands of others all around the nation have expressed their concern, and offered their assistance, through generous contributions in the form of food, clothing and other supplies, and through donations to appeals.

The response to the financial appeals has been magnificent, and the Commonwealth has played a part both by contributions to those appeals and by providing that donations to the appeals will be tax deductible. At a time like this a very great responsibility falls on the Commonwealth Government to do all it can to ease the suffering, and the financial burdens that have been created by the fires. The full extent of the financial assistance that will be needed can only be determined once the total damage has been assessed. This will take some days and is likely to run into tens of millions of dollars.

Much of the assistance from the Commonwealth will come under the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements. I have offered to the Premiers of South Australia and Victoria that initial instalments of Commonwealth assistance of \$10 million in the case of Victoria and \$6 million in the case of South Australia, be paid under the N.D.R.A. in advance of settling final details. This will enable the two State Governments to make an immediate start on providing relief and assistance, without excessive strain to their budgets.

But the Commonwealth will provide considerable assistance beyond these obligations. We have already agreed to extend the assistance to include concessional loans to home owners, small businesses and primary producers who have lost **their** property, as well as for the re-establishment of facilities such as recreation camps, assistance with the freight costs of stock and fodder, and up to \$1,200 per kilometre for materials for boundary fencing will also be given.

These measures will all be administered by the States. We will, of course, continue to review the needs of those affected by the fires and provide any further assistance that may be necessary. In particular, we are examining in association with the two State Governments, and the relevant local Governments, the kinds of additional measures that are needed to help rebuild or replace devastated community assets in semi-urban areas.

Some things can never be replaced, no measure of assistance can even start to compensate the relatives and friends of those who lost their lives in the fires. No measure of assistance can replace the treasured personal possessions so many people have lost. All Governments can do is to ensure that the suffering is not compounded by intolerable financial burdens on people and communities.

This terrible tragedy has reminded us all of something very important about Australia and the Australian people. In many respects Australia is a harsh land. It is the world's driest continent, and its climate is often severe. To build a nation in such a difficult environment has been one of the great human challenges of the last couple of centuries. Yet Australians have not only met that challenge with vigour and determination, they have created one of the world's most successful communities.

Above all, that has been made possible by the tradition of Australian mateship. That tradition grew out of adversity. It grew because Australians knew and still know that to overcome hardship and crises we have to help each other, to work together. The response, not just by Governments, but by people all over Australia to the great suffering caused by the fires in Victoria and South Australia, has shown that when some Australians are in very real difficulties they can count on each other to pitch in. That is the meaning of mateship.