

Item 3.1

Supporting Regional Communities Affected by Bushfire and Drought

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

When I became Lord Mayor in 2004, Australia was in the middle of the third longest major drought on record, the Millennium Drought. The current drought is again a major event with 98 per cent of the State impacted. The Central West, Far West and North West regions are the worst affected areas of NSW. This drought is more intense than the Millennium Drought, with higher levels of evaporation due to higher temperatures.

The drought has dried out the bush, and we are now also in the midst of what many are calling 'unprecedented' bushfires.

Six people have lost their lives this fire season in NSW, including four in the last week alone. A further 35 people, including 19 firefighters, have been injured.

The catastrophic fires have destroyed over a million hectares of land and more than 150 homes.

On Tuesday, in anticipation of the catastrophic fire danger, the Department of Education had announced more than 600 school closures and over 20 TAFE campuses. Exercising this caution was wise, as 300 new fires started across NSW that day, and nearly 50 homes were damaged or destroyed, including several in Turramurra.

More than 3000 firefighters were on the ground supported by 60 aircraft. However, the drought stricken regions have provided complication for fire fighters in the form of access to water, with fire tanks depleted and dams dry due to the prolonged drought conditions.

I would like to acknowledge the importance of the NSW Rural Fire Service, who are on the frontlines of fighting these bushfires. The Rural Fire Service is the world's largest volunteer fire service, with over 72,000 volunteers giving up their time to protect their communities. But Rural Fire Brigades are also more than just an emergency service, often also providing vital community services and assisting people with non-emergency roles.

At a time like this, the Rural Fire Service is stretched to its limits. That is why it is important we mobilise funds to support the NSW Rural Fire Service combat these unprecedented fires.

Last year, Council resolved in 2018 to donate \$200,000 to the County Women's Association of NSW Drought Aid appeal. Council also resolved that all Councillors are encouraged to promote tourism to regional and rural areas to help the economies of drought-affected local councils via their e-newsletters. We also noted that:

- dangerous climate change has left Australia in the worst drought in over 400 years;
- the drought crisis is having devastating effects on regional and rural communities in NSW, and many local councils in these areas require additional help and support as a result;

- climate change and land clearing have been shown to intensify the severity of droughts;
- the City has shown leadership across the metropolitan area on resilience and on creating strategies for a water sensitive Sydney.

But it has only got worse. Council should increase its donation to reflect the growing severity of the drought.

Since then, our response to climate change has evolved and on 24 June of this year, Council declared a climate emergency.

- We resolved that climate change poses a serious risk to the people of Sydney, and it should be treated as a national emergency.
- We called on the Federal Government to respond to this emergency by:
 - taking urgent action to meet the emissions reduction targets contained in the Paris Agreement by reintroducing a price on carbon; and
 - establishing a Just Transition Authority, with enough funding to ensure that Australians employed in the fossil fuel industries have viable and appropriate opportunities for alternate employment;
 - we noted that the City has an excellent record on reducing emissions, and preparing for the impacts of climate change.

I believe we have a responsibility to support our regional communities in their time of need and again provide financial support to relieve some of the devastating effects caused by the bushfires and the drought. We also need to consider the passionate work that the volunteers at WIRES do in supporting the wildlife caught in the bushfires or that have lost their habitats.

The staff at the City of Sydney have also indicated their desire to donate to these causes and Council should support these efforts by matching dollar for dollar the amount raised by staff.

Finally, it is critical that we support the economy in regional areas to allow communities to rebuild their livelihoods. We should look at ways to support 'Buy from the Bush' efforts and support regional tourism.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council donate \$300,000 to the Country Women's Association of NSW Drought Aid appeal from the 2019/20 General Contingency;
- (B) Council donate \$300,000 to the NSW Rural Fire Services from the 2019/20 General Contingency;
- (C) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to arrange a program for staff donations to bushfire and drought appeals and Council to match dollar for dollar any contributions until the end of March 2020 from the 2019/20 General Contingency;
- (D) Council donate \$20,000 to WIRES to assist wildlife from the 2019/20 General Contingency;
- (E) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to provides any available in-kind support to firefighting efforts, bushfire relief, and post-emergency clean-up, such as water trucks, other council service vehicles and staff; and
- (F) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to investigate opportunities to promote 'Buy from the Bush' and encourage tourism to regional and rural areas to help the economies of drought-affected local councils via their e-newsletters.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor