Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund

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FOREWORD

People living in regional NSW have been doing it tough in 2020, and none more so than those whose homes and livelihoods were affected by the bushfires across much of the state. Many are still rebuilding their lives, restricted by the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.

Despite the daily demands of the coronavirus, the NSW Government continues to prioritise support for communities in bushfire affected regions.

More than $2.3 billion has been committed to assist communities impacted by the bushfires, which includes supporting a temporary accommodation program, property clean-up and mental health services.

We established Resilience NSW to co-ordinate a range of support initiatives offered across government, and over the next two years has allocated $1 billion to help rebuild our bushfire-affected communities and make them stronger into the future.

This latest $250 million Bushfire Local Economic Recovery (BLER) Fund package is jointly funded by the Australian and NSW Government to further support the social and economic recovery of communities from 47 bushfire-affected Local Government Areas (LGAs) across the state. It aims to promote community, industry and local economic recovery in the short, medium and long-term.

Combined with a range of fast-tracked priority projects, over $500 million in joint funding will be provided to support bushfire impacted communities under the BLER Fund.

It will help retain and create jobs in regional areas and stimulate regional economies by supporting entrepreneurship and innovation, diversification, market expansion and capacity building.

It will also help prepare communities for future bushfire seasons, by funding refuge centres and energy security infrastructure for community buildings for example and will support regional economies by funding tourism campaigns and attractions that bring visitors to experience our beautiful countryside.

I understand many people in regional areas are feeling overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork they have had to complete this year as they rebuild their lives after years of drought and the devastating bushfires.

I would like to assure regional communities that staff from the Department of Regional NSW are on hand and are willing to help applicants to make funding applications.

The new Department of Regional NSW is a central agency for regional issues, focused on putting the needs of regional communities, industries and businesses first. Its mission is to help build strong, resilient communities and economies, support our young people, grow primary industries, create jobs and employment and oversee the use of our natural resources: our lands, mining and minerals and agricultural resources. It is also to make sure government investment into regional NSW is fair and delivers positive outcomes.

I encourage potential applicants to review the BLER Fund Guidelines, consider what your community needs and take every available opportunity to secure funding to recover, grow and thrive.

The Hon. John Barilaro MP
Deputy Premier
Minister for Regional NSW, Industry and Trade

OVERVIEW

The NSW Government and Australian Government are supporting the recovery of bushfire impacted communities through a range of funding programs that support local and regional economic and social recovery – including initiatives across economic, social, built and natural environment recovery.

The Bushfire Local Economic Recovery (BLER) Fund supports communities to recover both economically and socially from the 2019-2020 bushfires. The BLER Fund will make $500 million available for projects in bushfire affected communities.

All projects supported under the BLER Fund will be jointly funded by the NSW and Australian Governments.

Bushfire affected communities will have access to funding for infrastructure projects and local programs and initiatives that encourage the short, medium and long-term recovery.

Bushfire funding streams

COMMUNITY RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE FUND

Support community recovery, capacity building and improve future disaster resilience

INDUSTRY RECOVERY PACKAGE

Targeted support for driver industries of forestry, agriculture and horticulture

BUSHFIRE LOCAL ECONOMIC RECOVERY FUND

Support local and regional economic and social recovery projects

PROGRAM OBJECTIVE

The objective of the BLER Fund is to support economic and social recovery at a local and regional level in areas impacted by the 2019-2020 bushfires. The BLER Fund will support job retention and creation in these regions, strengthen community resilience and reduce the impact future natural disasters will have on our communities. The majority of funding should be committed to the areas most impacted by the fires.

Key Dates

KEY PHASE	DATE
BLER Fund applications open	27 October 2020
Applications close	11 December 2020
Assessment and approval process	Complete end of March 2021
Announcement of successful applications	From April 2021
Final project completion	No later than 30 June 2022

In extenuating circumstances, late applications may be accepted at the sole discretion of the Department of Regional NSW (the Department).

PROGRAM FUNDING

$250 million is available for new projects under the BLER Fund. Funding will be available in impacted regions, but will be focused on supporting the areas most impacted. Regions not directly or minimally impacted by the 2019-2020 bushfires are not eligible for funding under BLER. Eligible Local Government Areas (LGAs) are listed in Appendix A.

Grant amounts

The grant funding for individual projects is dependent on the project type.

- Infrastructure projects must seek a minimum of $400,000 with a maximum available grant of $20 million.
- Environmental projects including rehabilitation, remediation and resilience improvements must seek a minimum of $200,000 with a maximum available grant of $4 million.
- Programs, including social, business and environmental education initiatives must seek a minimum of $200,000 with a maximum available grant of $4 million.

Funding will be prioritised to support applications from areas most impacted by bushfires.

For organisations registered for GST and where it is payable, successful applications will be paid the approved grant amount plus 10 per cent by the Department.

Where an organisation is not registered for GST, it is not payable on grant amounts under the BLER Fund. Organisations not registered for GST must incorporate any GST paid by them to third parties into their project budget and funding request.

Co-contributions

Applicants are strongly encouraged to make a financial co-contribution to their projects; however, this is not an eligibility requirement. Co-contributions could include leveraging community funds, in-kind support, local government funds as well as funding from other sources including other NSW or Australian Government programs. Evidence of secured co-contributions will be required as part of an application where relevant. The delivery or viability of projects should not be dependent on co-contributions that have not been secured.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Projects will need to meet the program eligibility and assessment criteria to receive funding. All applications will be assessed for eligibility and only eligible applications will be considered for funding.

Applicants

Applicants must hold an Australian Business Number (ABN), Australian Company Number (ACN) or be registered with NSW Fair Trading under the Associations Incorporation Act 2009 or other Act.

An applicant must be one of the following entities:

- Councils
- Joint Organisation of Councils
- not-for-profit organisations, including business chambers, industry associations and charities
- research or academic organisations
- State Government corporations
- Local Aboriginal Land Councils.

For-profit organisations and state government agencies may be considered eligible applicants only where projects will deliver a clear public benefit.

A public/private partnership may only seek funding where the lead applicant is an eligible entity.

Section 355 committees of council are eligible to apply for funding, but the council will be required to execute the funding deed should the project be successful.

Applicants must have or be able and willing to purchase at least $20 million in public liability insurance.

Ineligible applicants

Ineligible applicants include:

- an individual or group of individuals (including sole traders and partnerships)
- an unincorporated association (including trusts) that is not a registered not-for-profit organisation
- discretionary investment trusts that are not a registered not-for-profit organisation.

Project location

Projects seeking funding must be delivered in an eligible LGA as listed in Appendix A.

Applicants are permitted to submit more than one application. Applications can be submitted for projects that will be delivered and provide benefit across multiple LGAs.

Where the applicant is not the owner of the land where the project will be delivered, landowner's consent will be required as part of the application.

Project type

To be eligible projects must:

- support the recovery of the local community's economy, social well-being, environment or improve resilience to future natural disasters
- be able to commence within six months of the funding deed being executed by the Department and be completed by 30 June 2022
- align with one of the following categories:
  - enabling infrastructure
  - industry and business development
  - social development
  - natural environment and resource development
  - built environment adaption.

The specific scope of works and key milestones of the project must be defined in the application.

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	PROJECT EXAMPLES
Enabling infrastructure	New infrastructure and functionality enhancements or upgrades to existing infrastructure, including improvements.	• Shared pathway, bike paths and pedestrian access • Restoration of bushfire impacted roads • Development of roads to support increased industrial development • Art galleries and other facilities to support social community development and economic recovery • Improved community road access and vehicle capacity
Industry and business development	Initiatives supporting entrepreneurship and innovation, business retention, development of regional specialisations, economic diversification, expansion and attraction, capacity building, workforce participation, skills development, small business development, and local and regional industry networks.	• Tourism campaigns (including digital product development) • Regional events • Workforce adaptation and work ready training programs • Remote working facilities and campaigns to boost regional economies
Social development	Community development and wellbeing, social support or social development initiatives.	• Resilience programs • Pools and other amenities • Community groups • Community hall upgrades and other critical social infrastructure • Community mental health programs
Natural environment and resource development	Natural environment restoration, environmental improvement initiatives and research into improved fire management.	• Regeneration activities • Breakwater and other coastal protection • Walking and mountain bike trail development • Restoration and improvement of parkland and other natural resources
Built environment adaption	Disaster risk reduction through adapting the built environment to future climate change and natural hazard conditions, including through the development of emerging technologies.	• Community refuge centres • Fire resistant infrastructure • Energy security infrastructure, such as solar power for community buildings • Commercialisation of new fire detection technology • Fire-resistant streetscaping • Upgrades to mobile communication security

Ineligible projects and project costs

Infrastructure and programs are not eligible for funding if they:

- are for the day to day delivery of essential or core local government services
- have exclusive private benefits or provide direct commercial and/or exclusive private benefit to an individual or business.

Ineligible project costs include:

- costs related to buying or upgrading non–fixed equipment or supplies unless it is a small component of a larger fixed project
- financing, including debt financing, or insurance
- rental costs for infrastructure projects and environmental projects
- for community programs, rental costs not directly associated with the program
- costs relating to depreciation of plant and equipment beyond the life of the project
- prizes
- non-project related staff training and development costs
- operational expenditure, including but not limited to regular repairs and maintenance
- ongoing / recurrent funding that is required beyond the stated timeframe of the project
- for infrastructure projects, funding for any ongoing staff or operational costs
- for non-infrastructure projects, funding for ongoing staff or operational costs beyond the scope and timeframe of the funded project
- retrospective funding to cover any project component that is already complete before a funding deed is executed by the Department.

Any project management or administration cost over 20 per cent of the total funding request is ineligible to be claimed under BLER funding. Administration and project management costs may include accommodation, transport, contingency and on-costs for eligible wages.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

All applications meeting the eligibility criteria must also meet the assessment criteria to receive funding, including:

1. Alignment with regional objectives
2. Local support and participation
3. Need for project
4. Feasibility
5. Enduring benefit.

1. Alignment with regional objectives

Applications must demonstrate that the project will support:

- the economic or social recovery of the LGA or region
- the strengthening of community resilience.

Evidence must be provided showing how the project aligns with one or more of the following:

- National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework
- National Strategy for Disaster Resilience
- State Recovery Plan
- Regional Economic Development Strategy
- Regional Recovery Plan
- Relevant local government strategies.

2. Local support and participation

Applications must provide evidence the community supports the project.

Evidence could include:

- letters of support
- minutes or reports from community meetings
- community led funding proposals.

The application must also demonstrate the project will optimise local and or indigenous employment and procurement opportunities. This could include work for local trades, services or other input businesses as well as potential for direct community employment on the project.

3. Evidence base

Applications must demonstrate the community has a need for the proposed project and its outcomes. This need can either be demonstrated through data analysis or through community driven interest in the project and its outcome.

Evidence could be demonstrated through:

- community surveys
- gap analysis
- local media
- evidence of degraded services or facilities
- local strategic plans.

4. Feasibility

Applications must provide evidence the project has been adequately planned, costed and appropriate mitigation strategies are in place for identified risks.

Applicants must provide:

- a detailed and realistic project management plan
- evidence that the project can be delivered by 30 June 2022
- confirmation that no serious planning, construction, zoning or other impediments exist for the delivery of the project
- evidence the applicant has the necessary expertise to deliver the project or can access experienced and qualified personnel to support the project delivery
- confirmation that all construction work delivered through the project would be delivered by builders accredited under the Australian Government Construction WHS Accreditation Scheme.

5. Enduring benefit

Applications must demonstrate the project output will deliver an ongoing, sustainable benefit for the community.

Applicants must demonstrate the project's outcome will either:

- improve community resilience to future natural disasters
- reduce future disaster risks
- provide ongoing facilities for community use
- provide community services
- provide economic benefit for the area
- sustained employment opportunities.

APPLICATION PROCESS

The BLER Fund is a single-stage application process.

Staff from the Department will be available to provide advice to applicants in preparing their applications.

It is strongly recommended applicants seek input from the Department prior to applying to ensure applications are consistent with BLER Fund's key objectives, are well-developed and the project is ready to commence within six months.

Applicants must submit the following documents as part of their application through the online portal:

PROJECT CATEGORY	APPLICATION DOCUMENTS REQUIRED
Category 1: $200,000 to $1 million funding requested	• Completed application form • Completed project plan template • Completed budget template (with evidence of estimated costs)
Category 2: Over $1 million funding requested	• Completed application form • Completed business case in BLER template (with evidence of estimated costs)

Assessment process

Departmental staff assess projects against the eligibility requirements and then facilitate the assessment of projects against the assessment criteria.

Through the assessment process, the Department may request additional information from the applicant or from any other source. The Department may also seek advice from other NSW Government agencies or other third parties (such as probity advisors) to assist with the assessment of projects.

The Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Assessment Panel (the Assessment Panel) will review project eligibility and assessment outcomes and form a list of projects that are deemed suitable/not suitable for funding. The Assessment Panel will consist of representatives from the Department, Resilience NSW and an independent member.

Where there is uncertainty or unintended outcomes arising from the BLER Fund eligibility requirements a practical approach will be taken to resolve issues. Final eligibility determinations will be made at the discretion of the Assessment Panel, with advice and recommendations from the Department.

The Assessment Panel will consider the individual merits of each project against the assessment criteria and how the project fits with the package of projects to support overall regional recovery. Broader factors that may be considered when assessing the overall package of projects suitable for funding include:

- variety of project size, scale, type, and domain
- amount of funding available
- importance of a project to the local and regional economies
- importance of a project to the economic and industry recovery of a local and regional area
- ability for a project to diversify an economy
- geographical spread of projects across bushfire impacted regions
- project benefits relative to the impact from the bushfires in a local and regional area
- broader recovery context and outlook
- alignment with existing NSW Government policies and strategies
- whether a project is most suited for funding under the BLER or another funding source
- market failure, market barriers and the role of government.

The Assessment Panel may recommend part-funding of projects if there is insufficient funding available for the whole project or only a component of the project is considered suitable/eligible for funding.

The NSW Government may refer projects to other funding programs for consideration.

The NSW Government and Australian Government will review all suitable projects for co-funding. Other factors may be taken into consideration when determining final projects to receive co-funding.

Projects are considered by the NSW Cabinet Committee on Expenditure Review for the final funding decision.

If the project is successful

Successful applicants will receive written notification of the grant outcome. Once notified, successful applicants will be required to:

- contact the Regional NSW Grant Management Office to enter into a funding deed with the NSW Government
- submit project progress reports to the NSW Government on a quarterly basis or, as outlined in the funding deed. Grants will be paid via milestone payments set out in the funding deed
- pay back unspent funds or those funds which have not been spent in accordance with the funding deed or receive a reduced final payment
- participate in a program evaluation after the project has commenced to determine the extent to which their projects have contributed to the objectives of the fund
- acknowledge the joint Australian and NSW Governments support for the project as per the NSW Government Funding Acknowledgment Guidelines available at nsw.gov.au/nsw-government-communications/branding
- note the NSW Government and Australian Government reserve the right to undertake an audit of grant funding within a period seven years from the signing of the funding deed.

Requests for variations or changes to the project will only be considered by the Department in limited circumstances.

The evaluation of the Program will require applicants to provide evidence of how projects have resulted in a measurable benefit to the community that is consistent with the objectives of the fund.

The NSW Government or Australian Government may use any information submitted by an applicant for promotional material.

If the project is unsuccessful

The NSW Government will notify applicants in writing the outcome of each application and will offer feedback session to unsuccessful applicants.

FIND OUT MORE

To help applicants prepare their application, additional information and resources will be placed on the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery web page, including relevant application templates.

A webinar will be held during the application open period.

nsw.gov.au/blerfund

The Department can assist applicants to develop strong applications. Please contact regionalnsw.business@dpc.nsw.gov.au or call 1300 679 673 for a referral.

Complaints

Any concerns about the program or individual applications should be submitted in writing to regionalnsw.business@dpc.nsw.gov.au. If you do not agree with the way the Department handled the issue, you may wish to contact the NSW Ombudsman via ombo.nsw.gov.au

Government Information (Public Access) Act

Applicants should be aware that information submitted in applications and all related correspondence, attachments and other documents may be made publicly available under the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009 (NSW)*. Information that is deemed to be commercially sensitive will be withheld.

The *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009 (NSW)* makes government information accessible to the public by:

- requiring government agencies to make certain sorts of information freely available
- encouraging government agencies to release as much other information as possible
- giving the public an enforceable right to make access applications for government information
- restricting access to information only when there is an overriding public interest against disclosure.

Communication

If successful, the NSW and Australian Governments reserve the right to use applicant and project information in media regarding the BLER Fund. Information may be used in the form of press releases, case studies, promotional material and in response to media enquires relevant to the BLER Fund.

APPENDIX A

- Armidale Regional Council
- Ballina Shire Council
- Bega Valley Shire Council
- Bellingen Shire Council
- Blue Mountains City Council
- Byron Shire Council
- Central Coast Council
- Cessnock City Council
- Clarence Valley Council
- Coffs Harbour City Council
- Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council
- Dungog Shire Council
- Eurobodalla Shire Council
- Glen Innes Severn Council
- Goulburn Mulwaree Council
- Greater Hume Shire Council
- Gwydir Shire Council
- Hawkesbury City Council
- Inverell Shire Council
- Kempsey Shire Council
- Kyogle Council
- Lake Macquarie City Council
- Lismore City Council
- City of Lithgow Council

- MidCoast Council
- Mid-Western Regional Council
- Muswellbrook Shire Council
- Nambucca Shire Council
- Narrabri Shire Council
- Oberon Council
- Port Macquarie-Hastings Council
- Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council
- Richmond Valley Council
- Shoalhaven City Council
- Singleton Council
- Snowy Monaro Regional Council
- Snowy Valleys Council
- Tamworth Regional Council
- Tenterfield Shire Council
- Tweed Shire Council
- Upper Hunter Shire Council
- Upper Lachlan Shire Council
- Uralla Shire Council
- Wagga Wagga City Council
- Walcha Council
- Wingecarribee Shire Council
- Wollondilly Shire Council

MORE INFORMATION

Phone: **1300 679 673**

Email: regionalnsw.business@dpc.nsw.gov.au

Website: nsw.gov.au/blerfund

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