

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS

Sydney – 13 March 2020

COMMUNIQUÉ

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) held its 48th general meeting today in Sydney. The discussion focussed on Australia's response to coronavirus (also known as COVID-19) and on recovery from the 2019-20 bushfires. Leaders also made progress on a range of existing COAG priorities, directed at improving the current and future wellbeing of Australians.

Protecting Australians from the impact of coronavirus

Australia is experiencing the impacts of coronavirus, but we are one of the best-prepared countries in the world, thanks to the early actions of all levels of government. Since January 2020, Australian governments have been working together to develop, implement and coordinate strategies to slow the spread of the virus, including through strengthening our world leading health system and implementing border measures. Today, leaders committed to leveraging their combined resources to slow the spread of the virus and ensure Australia stays ahead of the curve in minimising the impact of coronavirus on the Australian community and economy.

With the wellbeing and safety of Australians being their highest priority, leaders will continue to manage the risk of the virus based on the best and latest evidence and medical advice. The new *National Partnership Agreement on COVID-19 Response*, signed by all leaders today, is a 50-50 shared funding deal between the Commonwealth and the states and territories that will ensure the capacity of our health system to effectively assess, diagnose and treat people with coronavirus in a way that minimises the spread of the virus in the community and protects our most vulnerable. As part of the deal, the Commonwealth will deliver an immediate \$100 million advance payment, on a population basis, to the states and territories to prepare the health system.

Coronavirus has been declared a global pandemic and Australia is well prepared, including across non-health sectors. On 25 February 2020, at the request of the Chief Medical Officer, the Australian Government activated the *Emergency Response Plan for Communicable Disease Incidents of National Significance: National Arrangements* (National CD Plan). The National CD Plan, developed and endorsed by all jurisdictions in 2018, outlines how non-health sectors (such as police, childcare, schools, transport and essential utilities) will support the health sector response. Today, leaders welcomed the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee's (AHPPC's) development of a risk-based decision-making tool for mass gatherings. They agreed to work in a co-ordinated way and have regard to the advice of the AHPPC, should the need arise to adjust services in response to coronavirus. All decisions will be proportionate to the risk.

COAG agreed to commission real-time, transparent protocols, underpinned by advice from the AHPPC and working through the National Coordination Mechanism, to support a consistent approach to containment and preparedness for coronavirus. These protocols will include management of mass gatherings, school closures, health management in remote communities and public transport, with decisions on applying the protocols resting with states and territories. COAG further agreed that the AHPPC advice will have the status of COAG advice, and to implement and follow the advice, as necessary.

While coronavirus is first and foremost a health crisis, it is having significant economic impacts. Australia's strong economy means we are well-positioned to respond to the economic impacts of the virus. Our economy has demonstrated its resilience during past shocks and we are in our

29th consecutive year of economic growth. All Australian governments will play their part in delivering complementary, targeted and proportionate responses to the economic impacts of coronavirus. Leaders noted presentations from the Governor of the Reserve Bank and the Secretary of the Australian Treasury, and accepted advice that current fiscal settings in jurisdictions should be adjusted to mitigate the economic impact on Australians and best position the nation for recovery.

Healing and rebuilding from the 2019-20 bushfires

The scale of the destruction and disruption caused by the 2019-20 bushfires is unprecedented in Australian history. Leaders expressed their deepest sympathies for the lives, homes, businesses and wildlife lost as a result of the fires, as well as the impacts on Aboriginal culture. They paid tribute to those who served our country over the summer, especially our fire and emergency services, defence forces and the thousands of volunteers who supported relief and recovery efforts. Leaders also acknowledged the generous donations and offers of support from across the nation and all over the world.

With the fires now under control, leaders discussed the next phase of the recovery effort – a long-term, national approach to support communities heal and rebuild, while at the same time continuing to meet the immediate needs of those affected by the fires. Leaders agreed to implement a National Bushfire Recovery Plan spanning social, built, natural and economic recovery, and including local economic recovery plans for the most-impacted regions. This Plan builds on existing initiatives, including support to small businesses and primary producers, which is being rolled out in fire-affected areas.

Following the experience of this national-scale disaster, leaders agreed to review and if necessary update how governments apply the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. The review will look to streamline processes where possible, and provide for building back better and the restoration of environmental amenity. Australians impacted by the same disaster in the same way should have equitable access to recovery assistance, irrespective of what side of the border they are on, and be treated consistently and fairly.

Leaders acknowledged the changing global climate carries risks for Australia. Leaders were presented with a preliminary report prepared by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation on climate and disaster resilience. They will consider the final report and review the investments that governments make in disaster resilience at the next meeting.

Today, leaders agreed that building resilience to natural disasters requires coordinated action from all governments, together with the private sector and communities. They formalised this agreement by endorsing the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework and by asking Emergency Management Ministers to develop a National Action Plan to implement the framework in consultation with other COAG councils and forums. A new \$261 million Commonwealth-State partnership agreement will fund implementation of risk reduction initiatives in-line with the framework.

Leaders also agreed to take immediate action across three streams of risk reduction work: improving the resilience of the national telecommunications network; asking the Building Ministers' Forum to consider how to adapt the built environment to future climate and hazard conditions; and asking the Australian Data and Digital Council, in consultation with the Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management to improve national natural hazard data and intelligence to enable the development of new information products such as a national fire map.

Responding to the unprecedented drought

Extreme drought conditions are the most unrelenting effect of a changing climate in Australia. Despite recent rain, the Bureau of Meteorology advises that warmer than average conditions are likely until at least June 2020. Leaders acknowledged the Agriculture Ministers' Forum Drought Working Group and noted progress to date on actions to support drought-affected farmers and regional communities. They look forward to receiving detailed advice from Agriculture Ministers later in 2020.

Reducing violence against women and their children

Australian women and children have the right to live in safety and be free from violence. The murders of Hannah Clarke and her three children shocked the country and reinforced once again the prevalence of violence against women and their children. On average, one woman a week is killed by a current or former intimate partner.

Reducing this violence is everyone's responsibility. Reflecting their commitment to implement, and where possible, expedite their contributions under the Fourth Action Plan, leaders agreed to elevate Women's Safety Ministers' meetings to a new COAG Council to drive implementation of initiatives under the Fourth Action Plan of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022* (www.plan4womenssafety.dss.gov.au). Leaders agreed that national primary prevention campaigns and activities play an important role in changing the attitudes and behaviours that can lead to violence against women. As a priority, the COAG Women's Safety Council will work together to understand the current status of crisis accommodation and how to improve the effectiveness of current housing support. Leaders agreed that Women's Safety Ministers will start work on the development of the next National Plan, with national consultations to begin in Alice Springs in 2020.

Taking responsibility for our waste

Recognising that our waste is our responsibility, leaders agreed to introduce a ban on the export of waste plastic, paper, glass and tyres, fulfilling the commitment they made in August 2019. The ban will be phased in, commencing from 1 July 2020. Leaders also agreed a national response strategy to drive implementation of the ban and help reduce the amount of waste ending up in landfill. In line with the response strategy, governments will expand on work with industry to invest in growing the Australian recycling industry and build markets for recycled products.

Recognising particular waste and recycling challenges in remote and regional areas such as northern Australia, leaders agreed to ask the Ministerial Forum on Northern Development to ensure measures to support the waste export ban are coordinated across, and meet the collective needs of, northern Australian jurisdictions.

Understanding and preventing suicide

Reducing lives lost to suicide is a priority for all governments. Sadly, some groups are particularly at risk of suicide. One of those groups is veterans of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), and concerted action is needed to ensure everything possible is being done to stop these individuals taking their own lives. Leaders agreed to support the establishment of a new National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention to inquire into all suspected veteran and ADF suicides. Leaders asked the COAG Council of Attorneys-General to finalise arrangements, in consultation with chief coroners.

Leaders also agreed to enhance current suicide prevention initiatives for all Australians by expanding and sharing de-identified data collected on suicide and self-harm, exploring options to improve

access to person-centred aftercare services, and integrating suicide prevention services with non-health systems.

Acknowledging the higher rate of suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, COAG committed to working with Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia and relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations to develop culturally appropriate aftercare models.

Leaders will discuss suicide prevention and broader mental health reform again at the next meeting of COAG.

Building a workforce for the future

Leaders noted an update on the COAG Skills Council's progress to reform the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector to support millions of Australians obtain the skills needed to prosper in the modern economy. Leaders agreed three reform priorities for the sector: relevance, quality and accessibility. COAG noted the National Skills Commission will undertake research and analysis of future skills needs across industry to better align government funding with labour market demands.

Delivering infrastructure for Australia's future population

Leaders considered analysis on the market's capacity to deliver Australia's record pipeline of infrastructure investment to support the country's growing population. This analysis highlighted the importance of monitoring infrastructure market conditions and capacity at regular intervals to inform government policies and project pipeline development. Leaders agreed that Infrastructure Australia will work with jurisdictions and relevant industry peak bodies to monitor this sector.

Understanding how Australia's population is changing and the implications of these changes is critical to delivering the infrastructure needed for the future. Leaders agreed to a new National Population and Planning Framework and look forward to working collaboratively to understand and manage the effects of population change across Australia.

Reciprocal arrangements between states and territories for innovative customer focussed initiatives

Leaders noted the successful rollout of state-led technological innovations improving services for citizens (for example, digital driver licences) and supported these innovations being considered by all jurisdictions in a timely way.