

15 JANUARY 2020

CRUCIAL SUPPORT FROM REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES DURING BUSHFIRE CRISIS

Australia's regional universities have provided crucial support in their local communities as the nation grapples with Australia's worst bushfire season.

Members of the Regional Universities Network (RUN) – Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, and the University of the Sunshine Coast – have delivered a range of vital services to support students, families, communities and businesses affected by the bushfires.

RUN Chair and Federation University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Helen Bartlett, said that the network will outline its contribution, and the impact the fires are having on its staff, students and communities, in a meeting today between the Minister for Education, the Hon. Dan Tehan MP, and education portfolio stakeholders.

"RUN universities are deeply embedded in their local communities, and can increase support as needed. They are playing a crucial role now, and will continue to as we deal with the short-term and long-term consequences of the bushfire crisis," Professor Bartlett said.

"Support to students is imperative, as regional, rural and remote students and families live in affected areas. Charles Sturt established the Charles Sturt Bushfire Scholarship to provide scholarships of up to \$5,000 each to help students impacted by the bushfires with their studies in 2020.

"Federation University has activated its Disaster Assistance Scheme for impacted students. This provides free replacement of study materials, including computers, nursing equipment and uniforms, and free counselling and support services, cash grants and accommodation for students and staff who may have lost their homes.

"Quick response grants are available at the University of New England through the Student Emergency Assistance Fund for students experiencing financial hardship that impacts their ability to continue their studies. CQUniversity and Southern Cross University are offering emergency financial assistance to staff and students affected by this natural disaster," said Professor Bartlett.

"Many RUN staff are volunteering in their local regions, such as with the State Emergency Services, Rural Fire Service, St John Ambulance and Country Women's Association. We are providing these volunteers with paid leave.

"RUN universities have also provided emergency accommodation, food, toiletries and transportation across regional Australia.

"In Armidale, the Rural Fire Service (RFS), National Parks & Wildlife staff and Army personnel spent more than 1,870 bed nights at the University of New England. The university also served nearly 7,000 meals to the RFS and provided regular transport to and from Armidale CBD.

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"Charles Sturt provided accommodation, food and toiletries for around 200 firefighters at its Port Macquarie campus.

"Universities remain on standby to provide more beds across Australia, including in Bathurst, Wagga Wagga, Albury-Wodonga and the Gippsland region," Professor Bartlett said.

"Our graduates are providing essential services on the ground. There are RUN paramedics, nurses, police, vets, social workers, psychologists and scientists, for example, dedicated to helping their communities.

"RUN researchers, students and graduates are helping with injured wildlife and evacuated animals.

"University of the Sunshine Coast's Dr Celine Frere and Dr Romane Cristescu, and their detection dog, Bear, searched for wounded koalas on behalf of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, following the bushfires in NSW and Queensland.

"In Wagga Wagga, Charles Sturt's Equine Centre is housing domestic animals that have been evacuated, and staff are tending to injured horses. Staff and students are also at the local showground to look after animals," Professor Bartlett said.

"RUN universities will continue to provide support to students, staff and the wider community, and will closely liaise with federal, state and local government during the recovery process.

"We can expect RUN's world-class researchers to play a vital role in rebuilding communities and industries.

"Their expertise, which includes natural disaster recovery, mental health support for affected communities, analysis of native species endangered by climate change and bushfires, ground water, freshwater and soil resources mapping and management, regenerative forestry and Indigenous cultural burning practices, will be critical," Professor Bartlett said.

More examples of RUN support

Accommodation:

- Southern Cross University opened its Evacuation Centre on the Lismore campus in late November for up to 130 evacuees impacted by a bushfire in the Clarence Valley;
- CQUniversity provided accommodation for firefighters at its Rockhampton campus during the Yeppoon fires;
- University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) offices in The J Noosa and the CQUniversity's Noosa campus were used by authorities for emergency evacuations during the Peregrine Springs bushfires;
- University of New England (UNE) made 1,200 rooms ready for a possible evacuation of a nearby town, Guyra, but fortunately, the fire was downgraded; and
- Federation University's Churchill Campus has a standing agreement with La Trobe City Council in the Gippsland region to provide emergency accommodation on request, and has capacity at Berwick and Ballarat campuses should the need to house additional evacuees arise.

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Community:

- UNE is working with the NSW Rural Fire Service at a command level and closely with other government agencies in their area;
- Charles Sturt's Wagga Wagga campus is working with the NSW Government to provide space for displaced small businesses;
- Charles Sturt donated 500 water bottles and 500 pens to Koorinal High School for 'back to school' packs for students impacted by the bushfires;
- USQ donated a day of media training to Givit.org.au to assist them in spreading the word among the public on how donations are coordinated; Givit.org.au operates a virtual donations warehouse to ensure items go directly to people who need them, rather than random donations being sent to a disaster zone and then having to be sorted and distributed by locals on the ground; and
- USC raised \$7,190 for the Caloundra Branch of the Queensland Rural Fire Brigade from its community event in December, and donated \$15,000 to the Australian Red Cross earlier this month.

Research:

- RUN universities are involved in research projects in crucial areas, such as at UNE where project topics include community resilience, the health and recovery of the natural environment, waterways and wildlife;
- USQ researcher Dr Barbara Ryan is part of a multi-institutional project looking at bushfire preparedness to provide emergency agencies and councils with a way of enabling communities to save lives and properties;
- CQUniversity is heavily engaged in research relating to koala populations and habitats, natural disaster preparedness, emergency management and firefighting risk and safety;
- Southern Cross University's (SCU) geoscientists, led by Professor Ed Burton, have made a world-first discovery in revealing the lethal threat of soils scorched by bushfires; and
- SCU's Centre for Children and Young people's program on grief and loss is being adapted by the Department of Health to assist young people impacted by the fires.

RUN student and staff support:

- RUN students have access to counselling, accommodation and financial assistance;
- CQUniversity will provide 10 new scholarships worth \$5,000 a year to students studying the Bachelor of Emergency Service or the Graduate Certificate in Emergency and Disaster Management;
- Students can apply for assessment extensions and considerations are made if they cannot sit exams;
- RUN staff have access to paid leave for volunteer activities and emergencies, and have been offered counselling programs as well as flexible working arrangements; and
- At UNE and Federation University, on-campus college accommodation is available for any staff member affected by fires.

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