



Australian Seed Bank Partnership statement on bushfire recovery and COVID-19

May 2020

The 16th of April 2020 marked the beginning of the Royal Commission into the “Black Summer” bushfires which saw more than 10 million hectares of the Australian landscape burn with significant loss of life and property. Native flora and fauna continue to be severely impacted in the wake of the bushfires, including threatened species and the habitats that support them. Together with botanic gardens, the Australian Seed Bank Partnership has had an important role to play in supporting the ecological recovery effort by offering knowledge and advice and identifying seed of native species already conserved in Partnership seed banks in preparation for making collections available to support restoration efforts. Seed banks across the country are also continuing research that will support conservation and restoration of native habitats at risk from the impacts from climate change.

Immediately following the bushfires, National Parks and reserves were closed due to safety concerns and this limited the Partnership’s ability to deliver certain activities such as monitoring species’ responses to fire and collecting seed from species whose seeds germinate in response to fire-related cues like heat and smoke. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges for the Partnership with reduced onsite staffing of seed banks and botanic gardens in place to comply with the Australian Government’s social distancing measures and non-essential services shutdowns. Travel restrictions have also placed limitations on field trips and collecting, including trips to recently opened fire affected areas.

Despite these challenges, the conservation work of the Partnership and its Associates continues. Recent seed collections are being processed and stored, while priority research will continue. This time of restricted movement provides opportunities to consolidate data, and to publish and share research from recent projects. Preparations are being made for future research projects, especially those focused on bushfire recovery responses and how best to support our native habitats. These preparations will position the Partnership to resume the full breadth of our ex situ conservation work once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

While the health and safety of staff and volunteers must be the primary focus during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing impacts and future threats to native ecosystems from extreme fire and weather events remain significant issues to be addressed. With climate change continuing to exacerbate conditions leading to extreme fire events, work to conserve native species, restore impacted habitats, and build the resilience of landscapes will only become more important. The Partnership’s ongoing work and engagement with federal and state governments, conservation and restoration bodies, and scientific institutions, will continue to make a vital contribution to the national response to these challenges.