**Public Hearing: Senate Select Committee on Bushfires**

*Foodbank Australia Opening Statement, Brianna Casey, Chief Executive Officer*

*~ CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ~*

Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence at today’s hearing. I wish to start by acknowledging the traditional owners on the land on which we are variously meeting today, to recognise their continuing connection to country, and to pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

As Senators may already be aware, Foodbank has a federated structure, and I am here in my capacity as CEO of Foodbank Australia, alongside my colleague, Sarah Pennell. Every one of our state and territory teams played a role in responding to the 2019/20 bushfire season – a season that commenced in September 2019, and one of the toughest we have ever faced.

As explained in our submission, in addition to our everyday role of providing food relief to those who are vulnerable in our community, Foodbank also plays an important role during times of natural disaster. Many – but not all – state and territory Foodbanks are formally recognised in state emergency and/or disaster plans, making their task of providing essential food and grocery items to first responders, evacuation centres and displaced community members more efficient and organised. As noted in our submission, we contend that every state/territory plan should formally recognise Foodbank’s unrivalled scale and capacity in this regard, in addition to our role as an enabler to emergency relief providers. As part of that process, it is vitally important that Foodbank be resourced effectively to undertake this role, noting that very rarely – if ever – does a summer pass without Foodbank being called on to assist with bushfires, floods, cyclones or drought.

What made the last bushfire season particularly challenging was that it came on the back of a relentless drought that seriously affected Foodbank’s supplies. We saw less donations of core agricultural commodities, especially rice, because of the impact of drought on successive growing seasons and regions. At the same time, we saw a spike in demand for food relief from rural and remote areas devastated by the same consecutive seasons of drought, where families had endured long periods without on-farm income with local businesses throughout the community suffering as a consequence. In short – we had been hit on both a supply and demand front, and we simply did not have the stores of essential products available if the worst happened over summer.

We signalled to government in October 2019 that we were going to have a supply issue leading into what the best advice available to us suggested would be a catastrophic summer. I wish the outcome had been different, but we saw exactly what we were warned we might – a series of devastating bushfires across multiple states and territories, and we simply did not have enough products on-hand to keep up with demand.

Thanks to a rapid outpouring of support from the community and the Australian food and grocery industry, we were able to quickly bolster our supplies in the first couple of weeks of January – from grab and go items for first responders, to personal care items for evacuation centres, as well as essential pantry items for displaced families. Our teams were able to get food relief into affected areas in a targeted, organised way to minimise traffic on the roads, be sensitive to agency capacity constraints, and ensure appropriate products were provided. As a simple example, sending chilled products into communities without reliable power supply would have only added to their burden, so we used our decades of experience to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of our efforts.

We were fortunate to receive funding from the Australian Government in February 2020, which allowed us to replenish supplies of everyday essentials and start our transition to the recovery phase. That funding, as well as donations from our corporate partners, has been fully expended on food and groceries, in many cases sourced from regional areas suffering from the successive natural disasters, thereby helping to stimulate the hard-hit communities. We have reported to our donors on the impact of their donations.

This season highlighted more than any in our history the importance of ensuring locally-driven solutions, and channelling the community’s desire and enthusiasm to help in a constructive way so as not to add to the burden of exhausted volunteers and officials in bushfire-affected communities. For those of you who saw the queues of vehicles kilometres long, waiting to deliver car-loads of essential supplies to the Foodbank Victoria warehouse in January, you will know just how overwhelming the generosity of Australians was, and equally, just how important it was that these vehicles had a central location to make their donations, rather than adding to the logistics challenges in affected communities.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the invaluable, up-to-the-minute information and advice we had access to via a number of government committees and working groups, both in the lead-up to and during this crisis, including the all hazards and severe weather briefings coordinated by the Department of Home Affairs; essential briefings and collaboration opportunities facilitated by the Trusted Information Sharing Network’s Food and Grocery Sector Group; and Charities Roundtable initiated by the Prime Minister, Treasurer, Social Services Minister and Minister for Charities, now operating under the National Bushfire Recovery Agency. It is vitally important that formal debriefs are conducted to ensure lessons learnt from these forums are captured and executed when the next disaster strikes.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of the staff and volunteers at every state and territory Foodbank across the country, including my team at Foodbank Australia, as well as the 2,400 charities we distribute our food through, on top of the schools providing School Breakfast Programs. I have never been prouder to be a foodbanker. I do worry about fatigue, and I know that most witnesses appearing before you will share my concerns given we jumped straight from drought to bushfires to COVID-19, and there has been no time to come up for air. There is no simple solution to this, but I wanted to flag with you all today just how important it is that we remember there are real people both directly and indirectly affected by last summer, and we need to ensure they continue to get the support they need for as long as it takes.

We commend the committee for its consideration of this important issue, and Sarah and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.