

DISASTER READY TOGETHER



LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR

Survey Report

June 2024

Background

Local non-government community services play a crucial on-the-ground role in supporting their communities through disasters. Their role stretches across immediate emergency management to supporting long term recovery, resilience and preparedness against future disaster risks. Their clients are usually the most vulnerable people in a community – the most hard hit by disasters and the slowest to recover.

Disasters can have direct and indirect impacts on community services themselves – their premises, their staff, their services and their networks.

The Disaster Ready Together Project is a 12 month pilot project funded through the NSW Council of Social Services (NCOSS). It is based in Lismore, in the Northern Rivers of NSW and focuses on non-government community services in three local government areas: Kyogle, Richmond Valley and Lismore. This area has been impacted by three recent disasters: floods in 2017, fires in 2019/20 and floods/related disasters again in early 2022.

The aim of the Lessons Learned So Far Survey was to gather a snapshot of the extent and nature of impacts of recent disasters on community services; the lessons they have learned; and what they have done to reduce disaster risks in the future.

Key Insights

- Recent disasters in the Northern Rivers of NSW have had a significant impact on community service organisations, particularly the 2022 catastrophic flood disaster, which caused complete or partial disruption to service provision in 91% of organisations in this survey.
- The most common impacts were on staffing (79% of surveyed organisations reported staff disruptions and 31% reported staff resignations); damage to premises and physical assets; and records lost or damaged.
- Recent disasters had a significant impact on networks between services, council and emergency services. For the majority of organisations, the impact was positive as networks expanded to include new services and agencies.
- Recent disasters have triggered organisations to implement new measures to build organisational resilience and client resilience. 74.07% of surveyed organisations reported that they were 'getting prepared.'
- However, only 20.4% of organisations reported that they were 'fully prepared'.

The overall picture painted by this survey is one of a highly impacted sector in recovery, and in the process of getting prepared for future disasters – implementing new strategies, building new networks, building organisational resilience, and supporting their clients.



What we already know

Northern Rivers Community Fund (NRCF)

The **Northern Rivers Community Fund (NRCF)** has conducted the first two of four surveys in a five year longitudinal study on the impacts on community organisations (including community-led hubs) of the 2022 disaster across seven local government areas in the Northern Rivers of NSW.

Relevant findings (March 2022)



9%

reported a significant impact on their ability to offer their previous service, a further **25%** reported a moderate impact.



6%

reported significant damage including the need to demolish their premises, building or infrastructure destroyed or washed away.



Relevant findings (March 2023)



6.4/10

participants gave as an overall rating for organisational recovery

62.2%

reported staff still suffering from mental health conditions

Almost 50%

struggling with client complexity, severity and caseloads



1 in 4

organisations not yet returned to their premises



Over 60%

preparing for a funding gap when recovery funding ends later in 2023



University Centre for Rural Health (UCRH)

In June 2022 the **University Centre for Rural Health (UCRH)** hosted a Health and Social Care Workforce Roundtable in Lismore. Participants identified the following challenges for community service providers:

- ▶ Office space and equipment lost
- ▶ Staff directly flood impacted or providing shelter to family/friends
- ▶ Vicarious trauma and burnout supporting flood-impacted families– existing Employee Assistance Programs inadequate for the level of trauma and longer term timeframe
- ▶ 60% drop in applications for positions
- ▶ Aged care reform agenda will exacerbate staff shortages as many more aged care workers will be required under the newly reformed models
- ▶ Competition between local service providers for the same pool of applicants
- ▶ Dramatic reduction in number of volunteers/ number of hours existing volunteers can offer.

Collaborating 4 Inclusion

In June 2022 the Collaborating 4 Inclusion project at the University of Sydney conducted a national survey of community-based health and social care organisations. Focussed mainly on disability services (69% of respondents with a majority in QLD) the survey aimed to gather information about business continuity during and after eight types of disaster events, including the COVID pandemic. Results included:

only 7%

of services had not been impacted by any hazard event in the last ten years.

78%

agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to deliver an adequate level of services to their clients in the event of a natural hazard/emergency.

Barriers to business continuity reported were:

- ▶ Resource limitations
- ▶ Workforce challenges
- ▶ Communication barriers
- ▶ Lack of collaboration
- ▶ Limits to effective client engagement
- ▶ Inadequate knowledge and training in business continuity
- ▶ Supporting vulnerable populations
- ▶ Uncertainty and complexity.

There have not been any studies that focus their investigations on the impact of recent disasters on community services in the three specific local government areas that constitute the footprint of the Disaster Ready Together Project.

What we did

In October–November 2023 the Northern Rivers Disaster Ready Together (DRT) Project invited one key staff member in 136 community service organisations in Kyogle, Richmond Valley and Lismore local government areas to complete a 15 minute online survey.

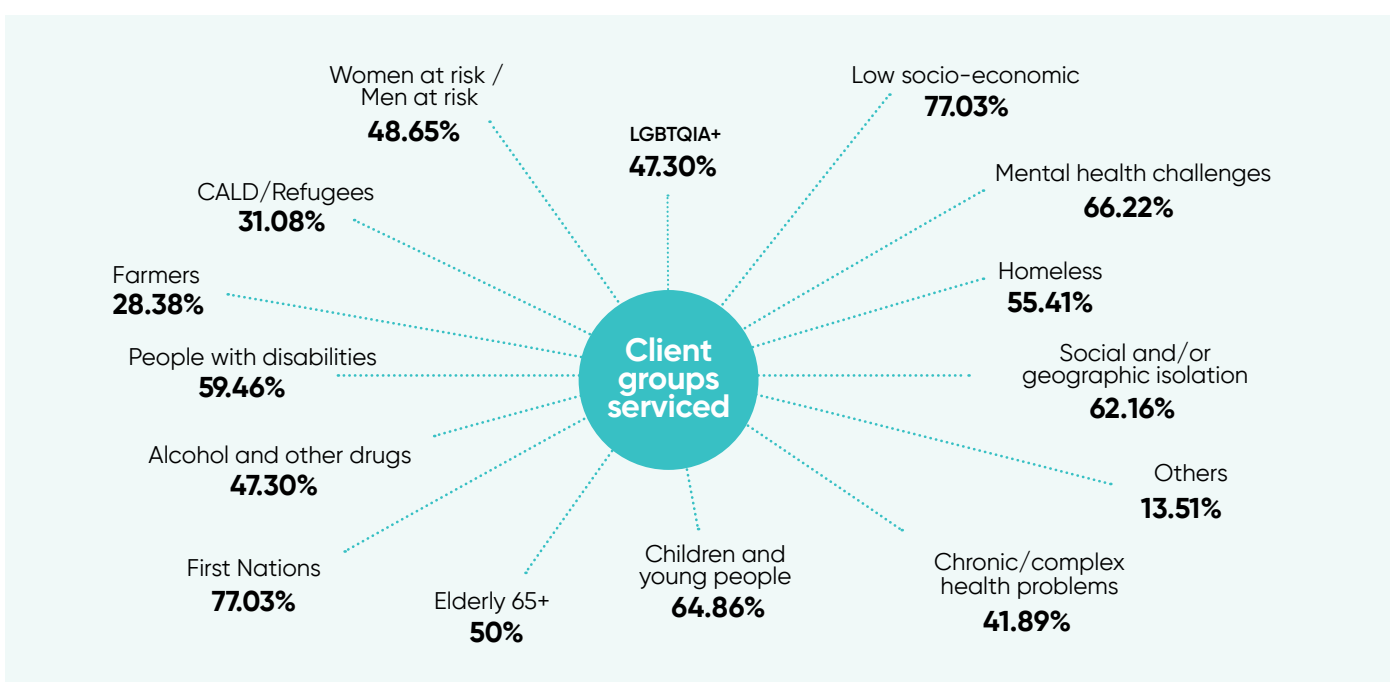
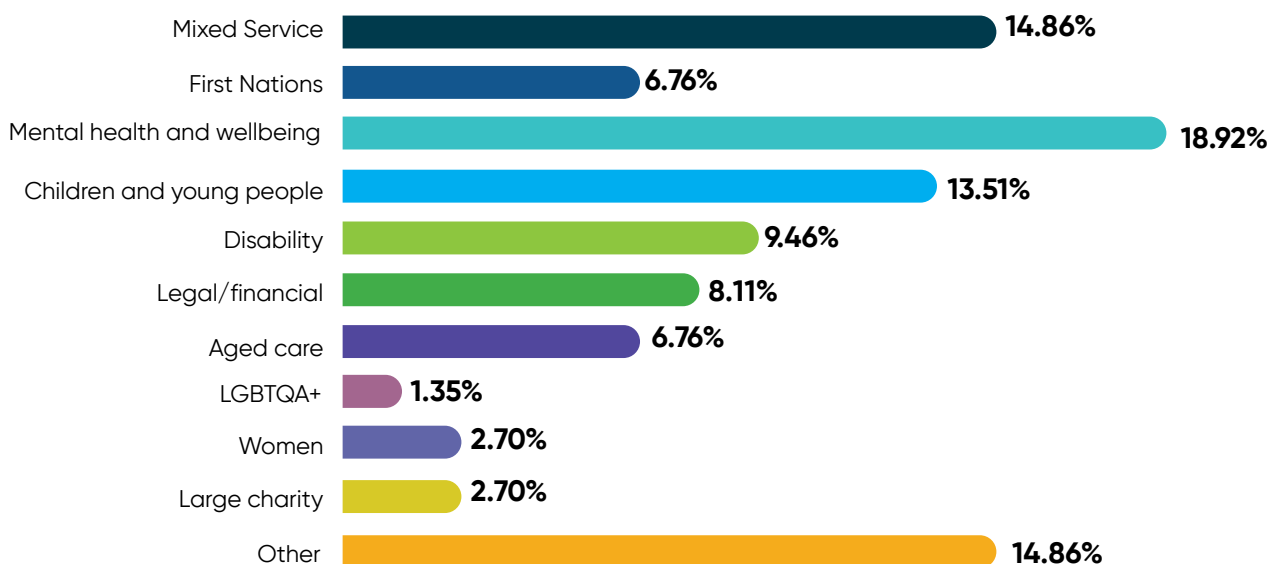
The survey aimed to gather information about:

1. The impact of recent disaster/s on community sector organisations, their services, networks, staff and clients.
2. Lessons that community sector organisations have learned about their strengths and vulnerabilities regarding disaster risk reduction as a result of recent disasters.
3. What community sector organisations have implemented to reduce disaster risks for their organisations, their services, networks, staff and clients.
4. Community sector organisations' perception of current levels of preparedness for future disasters.

Response rates to individual questions varied between 40.4% for the quantitative questions and 30.4% for the qualitative questions.



Who Responded?

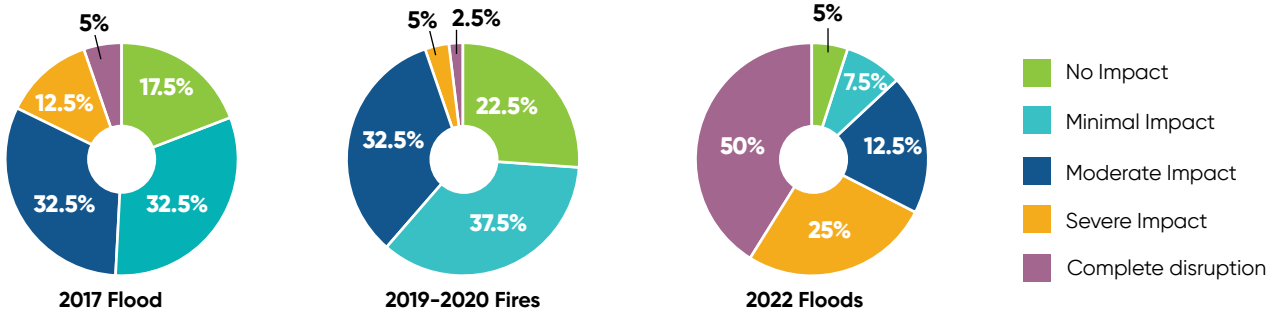


What we found: impacts of recent disaster

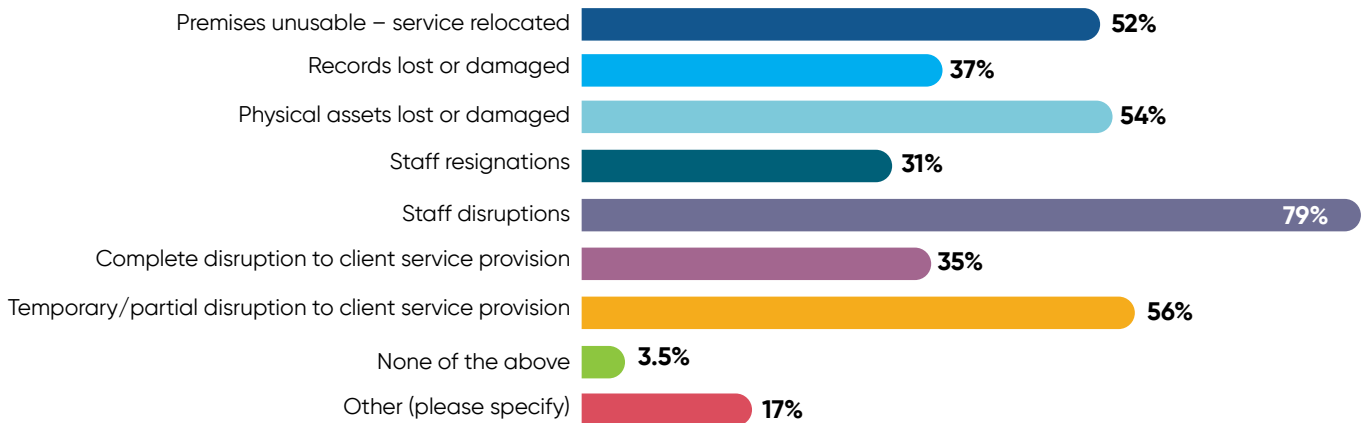
Which recent disaster impacted of your organisation?



Relative impacts



Specific impacts



“Complete disruption but not unable to deliver something... loss of office, vehicles, other assets, difficult to deliver services, cut roads, some loss of phone and internet, reduced staff availability as staff and their families were also personally affected.”

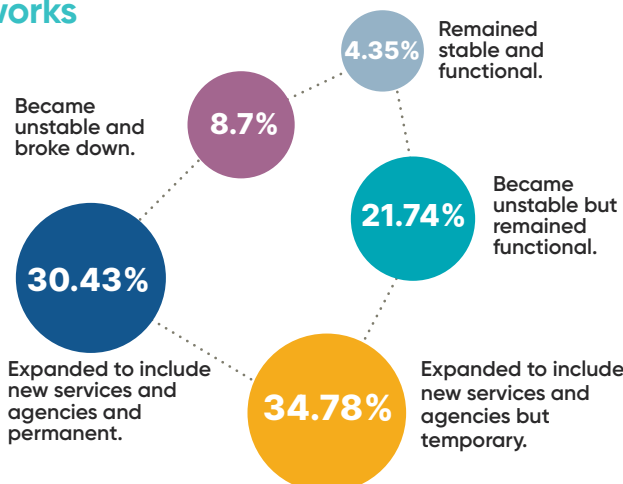
“Significant increase in ongoing costs such as insurance, loss of projects in progress.”

“Massive increase in demand ... 5 x more than average.”

“Flood trauma for staff and families.”

Impact on networks

77.2%
of respondents said YES, recent disasters had impacted on their organisation's networks with other community services, council or emergency management services.



“The flood events spurred our programs into existence and we have created a network of support for some parts of the community and this will continue to respond creatively and responsively to future disasters.”

“Our North coast networks were excellent, all aged care organisations worked together through COVID, floods & fires of the last few years to put our clients first.”

What we found: building organisational resilience

Before recent disasters

48.1%

of respondents reported that their organisation had, before recent disasters, implemented measures to build resilience and reduce future disaster risks. Types of measures included:



- ▶ Disaster emergency
- ▶ Evacuation/safety plans



Plans and processes for remote delivery of services



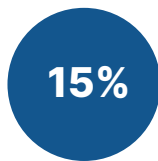
Mental health first aid training.

Since recent disasters

Has your organisation implemented any measures to build **organisational resilience** to reduce future disaster risk?



YES

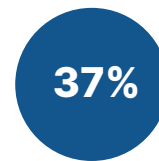


NO

Has your organisation implemented any measures to **build resilience** to reduce future disaster risk with your clients?



YES



NO



'We are still in recovery: Team burnout and exhaustion, many clients still on recovery journey, degree of helplessness felt by staff because the problem is so big. At the same time we have done a lot of work on planning for the future.'

'Loss of staff time was the most difficult issue, as well as the long term impact of both staff and clients losing their homes.... staff have really only just begun the journey of recovery. The planning work that needs to be done with our clients is difficult and we are working on using whatever resources we can find to support that process.'

Examples of measures implemented to build organisational resilience

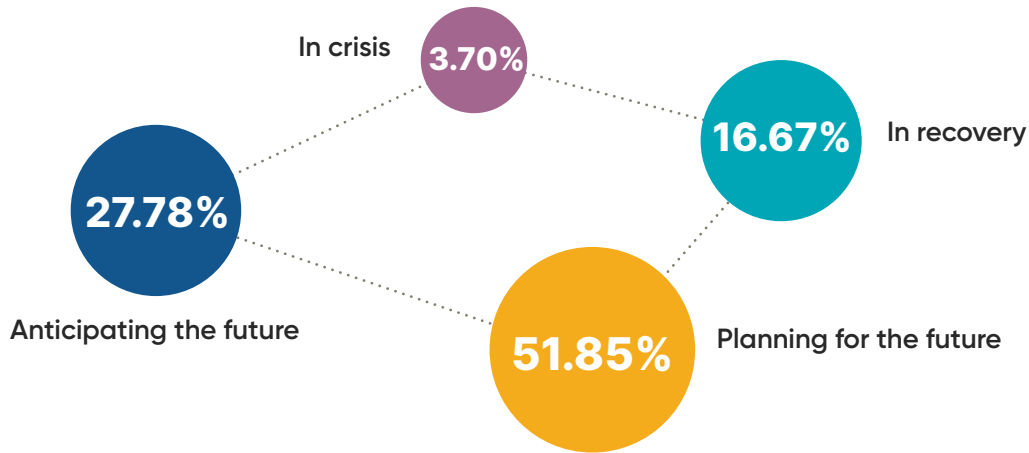
'All data and access is now cloud enabled and back-up in several locations.'	'More regular and up-to-date emergency information and support for staff via email and staff communication system.'
'Relocate premises to a less flood prone area, created pathways to enable remote service provision.'	'Connected more with local agencies and Council.'
'Only around supporting the workforce through an office disruption following an event. Not coping with a disaster.'	'Updated flood and evacuation plans.'
	'New policies'
'Established a Well-being Committee, increased external staff supervision, leased a property well out of flood level, delivered disaster focused training to all staff.'	

Examples of measures implemented to build resilience with clients

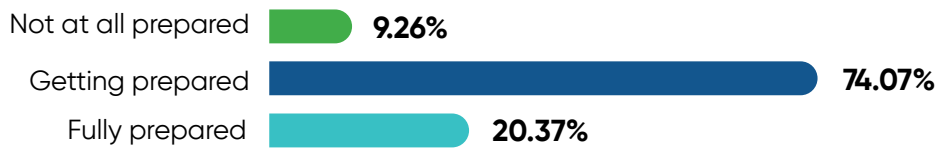
'Informing sooner about flood risk and encouraging evacuation plans.'	'Lifeline training for the accidental councillor.'
'Distributed and promoted information including flyers, posters, business cards about vital agencies and channels of communication that people can consult during times of disaster and emergency.'	
'Established additional ways to communicate and support remotely and to provide follow-up support services.'	'Financial literacy education about insurance policies.'
	'Disaster planning now common place with clients.'
	'Individualised plans.'
'Support to develop their own evacuation plans, prepare properties for bushfires, support to relocate infrastructure such as water tanks, pumps after both the fires and the floods.'	

Where are you now?

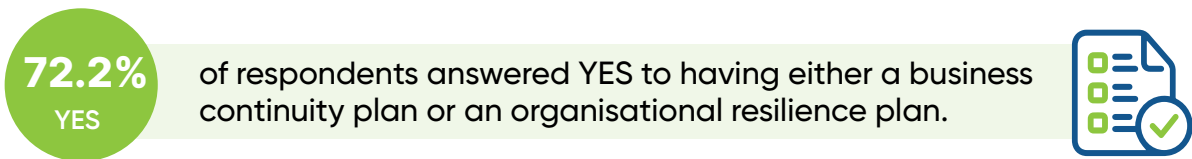
Where is your organisation at this point in time?



How prepared is your organisation?



Does your organisation have a business continuity plan?



'Whilst we have a plan - getting this down in writing and ensuring that we are fully prepared for an extreme event would be helpful.'

'While our main operation ceased for 9 months during essential flood repair and rebuilding works, we are prepared and equipped to monitor, manage and respond more quickly and comprehensively to a future disaster, including through a remote or mobile service delivery model away from central disaster zone, while also moving swiftly to restore full operations in the flood zone efficiently and effectively.'

'We are in the process of re-invigorating disaster planning including maintaining service provision and responding to future disasters.'

'As a small organisation we are able to respond to the needs of our team and community flexibly. That said, we do not have a specific disaster plan for future events.'

What we found: accessing information

An average of 49 people answered qualitative questions about how their organisations accessed information at both the height of recent disasters and into recovery, and from which organisations they sought that information.



How did your organisation access the information you needed to support your clients at the height of the disaster?

clients local radio **access** pages via ABC **emergency** news **meetings**
access information **contact** fire social media info
services information internet word mouth staff
online local organisations **community** know phone service families
Facebook area **centre** calls communication assess client **use**



How did your organisation access the information you needed to support your clients into recovery?

organisations social **social media** flood information email
community provided support local **services**
clients networks contacts **access** government internet online



What organisations did you approach to get the information that you needed?

services NSW neighbourhood centres **Resilience** Social Futures
people support **emergency services** staff
government hub **Council** govt NSW Lismore
Local organisations **Resilient Lismore** wellbeing Community
Finding SES Centrelink services network DCJ
BOM information Koori Mail disaster **Flood**

Rewards

'While it has been a horrific time and a long recovery, it has provided a lot of opportunities. Our staff are amazing and I cannot thank them all enough for everything they did to get the company, the clients and their colleagues through this.'

'The schools and preschools have done an amazing job of responding to the floods – by adapting and providing their services for young people.'

'Each client now has an individual Emergency Response Plan and vulnerable at risk clients have been identified on a priority contact list.'

'Our organisation was able to pivot and adapt quite quickly to the recent flood disaster by responding to needs in the community and filling a gap (in affordable food provision) when it surfaced.'

'We have looked at understanding who we are as a team, where we are placed, our risks, the impacts of certain types of disasters on the team, service delivery and supporting staff before, during and after.'

Challenges

'Still just trying to get back to stability. Need safe spaces for organisations to operate from.'

'All of the disasters have had a significant impact on all communities and services. The collective challenge of recovery has been massive and will take a long time to recover from.'

'The available workforce was already very limited before the disasters, was impacted during and after, and the lack of affordable, suitable housing impossible to attract workers from outside the area.'

'We received two grants ... but both these grants were one year. We are working with young people who are requiring long term, intensive tailored mental health support but are now operating with no government funding and relying solely on philanthropy and donations.'

'We are still in recovery: team burnout and exhaustion, many clients still on recovery journey, degree of helplessness felt by staff because the problem is so big. At the same time, we have done a lot of work on planning for the future, so both.'

'I am an Early Childhood teacher and have been left with the responsibility of finding a suitable site to rebuild – so to negotiate with the council, crown land and native title as well as applying for grants (large grants). We currently don't have land.'

References

Collaborating 4 Inclusion (2022). *A National Survey of Community-Based Health and Social Care Organisations on Business Continuity Planning*. University of Sydney.

Northern Rivers Community Fund (2023). *Research, Respond, Recover: A year on from disaster. Flood Impact Report*. nrcf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NCRF_Flood_Report_2023-A-Year-On-From-Disaster.pdf

University Centre for Rural Health (2022). *Notes – Health and Social Care Workforce Roundtable Thursday 16 June 2022 UCRH – Lismore*.

Resilient Lismore's Disaster Ready Together initiative is supported through the Community Sector Disaster Capability project – a disaster resilience and prepared project led by the NSW Council of Social Service with the LCSA and AbSec. Funded through the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund under the joint Australian Government – NSW Government National Partnership Agreement on Disaster Risk Reduction.

Although funding for this product has been provided by both the Australian and NSW Governments, the material contained herein does not necessarily represent the views of either Government.

We acknowledge that we are living and working together to recover from this climate disaster on Widjabul Wia-bal Country in the Bundjalung Nation, and pay our deepest respect to the continuing connection, knowledge and leadership of First Nations people.