

## **Lessons from the Sunburnt Country, land of droughts and flooding rains: how environmental emergencies have shaped data access policy and practice in Australia**

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There is still no comprehensive information strategy governing access to and reuse of public sector information, applying on a nationwide basis, across all levels of government – local, state and federal - in Australia. This is the case both for public sector materials generally and for spatial data in particular. Nevertheless, recent years have seen some significant developments in information policy and practice, the result of which has been a considerable lessening of the barriers that previously acted to impede the accessibility and reusability of a great deal of spatial and other material held by public sector agencies. Much of the impetus for change has come from the spatial community which has for many years been a proponent of the view “that government held information, and in particular spatial information, will play an absolutely critical role in increasing the innovative capacity of this nation.”<sup>1</sup>

Breakthroughs were forged from 2005 on, driven by factors including reviews of government information access and reuse practices, reform of Freedom of Information regimes to introduce pro-disclosure “right to information” principles, and the adoption of open content Creative Commons licences as the default position for distribution of government copyright materials. However, these factors alone are not sufficient to account for the significant shift in policy and practice that has occurred within a relatively short timeframe. This paper considers the impact of a series of natural disasters in Australia over the last decade – cyclones, bushfires, and floods – and the strong community expectation of an immediate and effective response by government as a catalyzing factor in shifting policy and practice with respect to data access and reuse.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Spatial Consortium, *Submission to the Review of the National Innovation System*, submission no. 307, p 2, at [http://www.innovation.gov.au/innovationreview/Documents/307-Australian\\_Spatial\\_Consortium.pdf](http://www.innovation.gov.au/innovationreview/Documents/307-Australian_Spatial_Consortium.pdf)