

# Australia's largest city ringed by fires

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For the third time in eight years, residents of Sydney find themselves surrounded by serious bush fires this week. More than 180 buildings, mostly homes, have been destroyed since Christmas Eve, hundreds of lives have been threatened, major road and rail links have been cut and thousands of hectares of national parks and other forests have been incinerated.

A pall of acrid smoke engulfs the entire metropolitan area, sending the air pollution index above 220—almost five times the safe level. About 10,000 homes remain without power, leaving some without running water, and 3,000 have no telephone access.

If not for the heroic efforts of some 5,000 firefighters—most of them unpaid volunteers—the toll could have been much higher. An estimated 11,000 homes were saved, more than 1,000 people were evacuated, and 12 evacuation centres were established in local halls and social clubs.

An estimated 100 separate fires are still burning to the city's north, west and south, some out of control, and the emergency is expected to worsen this weekend, with hotter weather and blustery winds predicted. So far, most of the damage has been sustained around the fringes of the metropolitan area, as well as near Wollongong, a major industrial city 100 kilometres to the south. However, fires also spread unexpectedly from the Blue Mountains, just west of Sydney, to western and north-western suburbs, including St Marys and Baulkham Hills.

Most of the fires originated from blazes ignited by lightning in nearby mountainous forests in the early hours of Christmas Eve. On Christmas Day they were fanned by winds of up to 90 kph. With temperatures reaching 35 degrees Centigrade and exceptionally dry air, fires spread rapidly. One firestorm raced 60 km in six hours, a speed described as unprecedented by a fire service spokesman.

Further afield, fires burned in many areas across the state of New South Wales, and in and around the national capital, Canberra. Some farms burnt and an estimated 5,000 sheep and 100 cattle perished.

There are fears that the fires could become as devastating as January 1994, when four people were killed, about 400 homes were gutted and more than 600,000 hectares of forest were lost across NSW. In January 1997, fires again threatened Sydney's southern flank, including the Royal National Park, which was substantially burnt out in 1994. This year, three-quarters of the park has been blackened, creating an ecological catastrophe.

These frequent disasters are occurring despite the development of sophisticated technology for predicting weather patterns and preventing and fighting blazes. It is true that summer bush fires are a perennial natural hazard in Australia—due to a combination of highly inflammable eucalypt bushland, severe heat and lightning strikes. But all the more reason to expect careful planning, the maintenance of fully-equipped professional fire-fighting services and the allocation of adequate resources.

Instead, the burden of bush fire prevention and fighting falls almost exclusively on volunteers, often working with outdated equipment. The NSW Rural Fire Service, which covers more than 90 percent of the state, including 1,200 towns and villages, has a volunteer membership of about 70,000, but only 116 permanent staff.

In 1996, following the 1994 disaster, senior deputy State Coroner John Hiatt criticised the NSW government and the state's fire and emergency services and called for a major overhaul. But Premier Bob Carr immediately rejected his main recommendation for the amalgamation of the Rural Fire Service with the salaried NSW Fire Brigades (NSWFB), which is confined to the state's main urban centres. Carr cited the cost of replacing volunteers with professional firefighters as one of the primary factors.

The state Labor government also failed to fully implement Hiatt's proposals for a permanent board to regulate fire services and for a government radio network to ensure that all fire units could communicate with each other. A Joint Fire Services Standing Committee was established to try to resolve tensions between the two services, but both continue to compete to fill police requests for emergency assistance in Sydney's sprawling semi-urban fringe areas.

In 1997 the Rural Fire Service was restructured and centralised, reducing the autonomy of local volunteer brigades. The state government claims that its budget has expanded by 123 percent since 1994. Yet, the government still provides only 13 percent of its \$116 million annual allocation. Nearly three-quarters comes from contributions from insurance companies, which have a direct interest in keeping its budget low.

By relying upon the sacrifice of volunteers, the government reduce costs enormously. Its Rural Fire Service spending of less than \$16 million a year—about \$3 per head of the state's population—is but a fraction of the \$321 million annual cost of

the NSWFB. Although the number of NSWFB fire stations and full-time firefighters has grown marginally in outer Sydney suburbs since 1994, Rural Fire Services volunteers cover the outlying areas.

Even in the current emergency, only about 900 of the NSWFB's 3,048 full-time and 3,348 part-time firefighters have been called into the bush fire operations. Professionally-trained crews have been left idle, while hundreds more volunteers have been brought in from other states—Victoria, Queensland and South Australia.

While the Carr government claims to have increased the NSWFB budget by 51 percent since 1994-95, the Fire Brigade remains seriously underfunded. This month, state Auditor-General Bob Sendt revealed a mounting deficit in the NSWFB's operating costs since 1999, partly due to firefighters' pay rises not being fully funded. Sendt reported that the NSWFB was using firefighters' leave entitlements to finance recurrent expenditure. "The government clearly needs to address the poor financial position of the fire brigade to allow them to continue to operate in a viable way," he said.

Following the 1994 inferno, proposals were made for the state government to purchase large fire-fighting aircraft of the type used in Canada, or at least hire them during the bush fire seasons. These calls have gone unheeded.

Some evacuees and firefighters have blamed another government agency, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, for not carrying out sufficient back-burning in national parks in the lead-up to the summer fire season in order to protect residential areas. One newspaper reported a backlog of more than 50 proposed burn-offs in the Blue Mountains because environmental assessments had not been completed. In part, the delay was caused by government agencies and departments not having the funds for the assessment costs of \$7,000 per burn-off.

State Emergency Services Minister Bob Debus attempted to dismiss the criticism, claiming that hazard reduction had been increased by 20 percent in the past year. He provided no statistics to substantiate his claim. National Parks and Wildlife Service director general Brian Gilligan sought to silence residents by declaring that he found the complaints "quite offensive". Gilligan argued that the death of four of his staff during a backburning operation 18 months ago proved that his agency was active in hazard reduction work. Later, he admitted that even high-priority burn-offs were sometimes postponed until the following winter season.

In an effort to deflect away from these questions, the government, fire chiefs and the media have blamed many of the fires on arsonists. Rural Fire Services Commissioner Phil Koperberg suggested that about 40 of the 100 fires had been deliberately lit, based primarily on the fact that the causes of these fires had not been accounted for. It is simply assumed that the fires were started deliberately started by arsonists rather than ignited accidentally, or by other causes such as embers

carried by winds.

Acting Premier Andrew Refshauge seized upon police and media reports of "firebugs" to announce the formation of a special police task force and to call for anyone convicted to be severely punished. He was joined by the Murdoch-owned *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, whose editorial yesterday declared that offenders should be treated as "the very worst type of criminal" and suggested the return of the death penalty. Noting that the maximum penalty was 14 years' imprisonment, the editorial concluded: "Some might even argue: jail is too good for them."

This witchhunt serves to divert attention away from the social and economic factors worsening the fire damage. The evidence of arson remains slight. As of Friday, police had questioned three Wollongong boys, aged 15, but decided not to lay charges. Two young men were charged with lighting small fires in urban areas, one in Canberra and one in Sydney, but neither was charged with arson.

The fire disaster has evoked divergent class responses. Thousands of ordinary working people, from urban and rural areas alike, have risked their lives fighting the fires, provided food and shelter to evacuated families and donated generously to relief funds.

By contrast, the federal Howard government has given just \$1 million to the NSW Bushfire Relief Fund, matching an equally inadequate donation from the state government. As for the insurance companies, they have delayed or suspended fire coverage to home owners. Those taking out a new policy or increasing an existing policy with CGU Insurance, for example, will not be covered for losses caused by bush fires for seven days.

An Insurance Council of Australia spokesman said such embargoes were common during natural disasters. According to the *Australian Financial Review*, the same companies are expecting increased profitability over the next three or four years, because of higher premiums, including an average 16 percent rise over the past year in the price of fire and property insurance.



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