

Sydney fire crisis highlights increased reliance on volunteers

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During the first week of December, Sydney—Australia's largest urban area with over 4 million residents—faced its second major bushfire disaster in two months. For three days, soaring temperatures and 70 km/h winds fanned scores of fires on the city's outlying fringes, killing an elderly man who lived in a caravan, injuring five firefighters and destroying at least 48 homes.

If not for the bravery of some 4,500 firefighters, mostly unpaid volunteers, and hundreds of local residents, the toll would have been far greater. Up to 1,000 people were evacuated from homes threatened by fire fronts that erupted swiftly to the north, south and west of the city. New South Wales Rural Fire Service (RFS) spokesman John Winter expressed surprise that more homes were not lost, praising the efforts of homeowners who battled flames with garden hoses.

On December 4, the day following the initial outbreak, fires caused widespread electricity blackouts and dips. Power and phone services were cut to thousands of homes. Businesses lost power and were forced to shut down computer systems. Suburban and regional train services were halted or disrupted and major roads and motorways in and around Sydney were closed, stranding commuters and travellers. Performances at a number of venues were cancelled. For the first time in its 29-year history, the Sydney Opera House shut its doors.

Firefighters and residents were given no respite the following day as fires broke out in the Blue Mountains to Sydney's west and in rural locations in the state's central coast region. Nineteen schools remained closed. By the end of the week, more than 100,000 hectares had been blackened across the state of New South Wales.

With the Sydney metropolitan area covered by a pall of smoke, NSW Health officials advised residents to remain indoors. The Environmental Protection Agency's regional pollution index reached 232—anything over 50 is considered high. The state's ambulance service recommended the cancellation of outdoor sports to prevent lung infections. People with asthma, heart disease and lung problems were warned they could face difficulties.

Because of a severe year-long drought, the state's fire season began long before summer. In early October, high temperatures and swirling winds fanned 47 fires throughout the state and in Sydney's southern and western suburbs, destroying 10 homes. More than 100 residents in Engadine, in Sydney's south and in the Windsor Downs region to Sydney's west were evacuated.

The latest emergencies came less than 12 months after what was

described as Australia's longest ever bushfire crisis. Last December and January, 109 homes were destroyed in the Sydney region and 750,000 hectares of bushland incinerated throughout the state.

Moreover, this is the fourth year in less than a decade that Sydney had been ringed by fire. In December 1993-January 1994, four people were killed, 205 homes were gutted and 800,000 hectares of forest were lost across NSW. In January 1997, fires again threatened Sydney's southern flank, including the Royal National Park.

With NSW in the midst of one of the worst droughts for a century, this fire season is expected to be one of the most severe in history. Yet, despite the state's tinderbox-like conditions, official measures to protect the population have been minimal.

Under criticism following last summer's disaster, the state Labor government led by Premier Bob Carr set up a parliamentary committee in February to examine the adequacy of fire-prevention and fire-fighting services. The committee of seven MPs—three Labor, two Liberal-National Party opposition and two Independent—defended the government, reporting in June that, "all aspects of bushfire fighting, coordination, equipment, technology, communications and training in NSW [have] improved since the 1994 fires."

Despite admitting that government agencies had failed to carry out recommended levels of hazard reduction burning since last summer and to adequately clear or even map fire trails in forests, the MPs argued that three main advances had been made: increased funding and upgrading for the volunteer Rural Fire Service (RFS), greater use of water-bombing aircraft and the introduction of stronger powers to restrain residential development in bushfire-prone areas.

Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that these claims are deceptive and disguise ever-greater dependence on the unpaid labour of about 45,000 active volunteer RFS members, plus an increasing onus on local residents to prevent and fight fires themselves.

While the report emphasised that recurrent funding for the RFS had increased from \$50.7 million in 1994-95 to \$120.7 million in 2002-2003, it did not explain that three-quarters of the RFS budget comes from levies paid by insurance companies. This year, the state government itself is contributing only \$16.4 million. In his 1996 report on the 1994 fire deaths, Deputy State Coroner John Hiatt recommended the creation of a fully professional fire service. Carr rejected his call out of hand for cost reasons, leaving more

than 90 percent of the state, including Sydney's outer reaches, covered by the RFS.

Without even taking any evidence on the issue—which was excluded from their terms of reference—the MPs simply endorsed Carr's stance on the grounds that the establishment of a full-time fire service would reduce the number of volunteer firefighters and undermine "community responsibility".

The committee went further, praising the government for establishing "community fire units," which consist of "lightly trained" local residents. According to the report, 140 such units have been commissioned, with another 80 applying for formation since last year's fires. Those joining the units receive even less training than regular RFS volunteers do—the recommended level is four sessions of two-and-a-half hours per year.

The MPs noted that 109 aircraft had been utilised to fight last year's fires and lauded the temporary hiring of two large helicopter water-bombing air cranes for this summer. Yet the report revealed that a total of only four aircraft have been hired for the season, and backed the government's cost-cutting refusal to purchase fire-fighting aircraft.

Finally, the committee noted that over the past 30 years, there had been "a considerable increase in urban populations within a 150 kilometre radius of Sydney," so that "there are now large numbers of people living in areas adjacent to bushfire prone parklands, forests and reserves". Without elaborating, let alone examining the underlying causes, the MPs referred to instances in which local councils had permitted "inappropriate development".

To tackle the dangers produced by this substantially unchecked sprawl, the report endorsed the government's "Planning for Bushfire Protection" guidelines, which came into effect on August 1, giving RFS Commissioner Phil Koperberg the power to reject building and development plans in fire-prone zones. But Koperberg has already assured property developers and home building companies that their interests will be protected under the new regulations.

"Development will be banned only in the most grotesquely dangerous situations," he stated on August 24, replying to complaints by the developers' lobby, the Urban Development Institute of Australia. "The last thing we want to see is people who have bought land in good faith being unable to build a home." The guidelines do not affect previous approvals or existing buildings, which extend far into bushland areas, and the proposed bushfire zones are reportedly smaller than those previously designated by municipal councils.

Running throughout the parliamentary report is support for the increased burden that the government, backed by the media, has placed on residents over the past year. Householders are now responsible for hazard reduction on their blocks and liable for costs if the RFS decides to compulsorily enter their property to burn off vegetation.

In addition, there has been a far-reaching shift in fire-fighting policy. In previous years, police carried out forcible evacuations from homes threatened by fires, on safety grounds, but this year householders have been urged to be "self-reliant". In the face of this month's terrifying fires, they were encouraged to stay at home, keep their children away from school and use hoses and

buckets to defend their homes.

"Stay at home and help us," Koperberg stated. Later, he praised the courage of those who did so and criticised those who went to work, leaving their homes unprotected. The *Sydney Morning Herald* commented that he had "elevated residents to custodians and honorary firefighters".

As part of this campaign, the authorities and the media have depicted homes as safe places to shelter from fires. RFS spokesman Winter even likened them to huge portable coolers. "They take a lot longer to burn than the bush around them. At least 85 percent of houses (burnt) are lost to ember attack. You can easily put out those embers with a hose or a bucket."

Likewise, the media has heavily promoted the heroism of the volunteers and residents who risked their lives to battle flames. While there is no question that many ordinary people are willingly prepared to fight the blazes in order to save their homes and those of their neighbours, the government's refusal to allocate sufficient resources to bush fire management and fire fighting could have deadly consequences in the horrendous fire conditions expected in the weeks ahead.

WSWS spoke to residents of Barnes Crescent, Menai, in southern Sydney, where eight houses were burnt in 1997. This year, flames tore along a nearby gully. Fearing another disaster, at nearly every house in the street, residents were standing by with hoses or preparing to evacuate again.

They spoke of the swiftness with which fires can engulf an area, highlighting the dangers for residents who choose to stay and fight the blazes. They also commented on the lack of information from authorities and the absence of any noticeable official action since 1997.

The house next door to Ann Gray was totally gutted in 1997. "The winds were really gusting and the fire went across quickly," she said. "This time, you just wait and think, 'when is it going to come?' I'm not aware that any preparations have been made since last time. I would have thought there would have been more clearing done."



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