

# Australia: Bushfires raise questions over emergency resources

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Angry residents are seeking answers from the Western Australian state government over a large bushfire that broke out in the Margaret River region, about 300 kilometres south of Perth, on November 23.

The fire destroyed 37 homes, including the historic Wallcliffe house, and damaged 23 others. There were no fatalities, but such a disaster was only narrowly averted. Some residents received official warnings only after the fire had swept toward their area. At the coastal town of Prevelly, 55 trapped residents had to be evacuated by jet skis to a search and rescue vessel after the only road from the town was cut.

The fire originated in September as a controlled burn operation in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park by the state Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). The area had not had a controlled burn for 30 years, posing a risk for the coming summer fire season. The fire was restarted on November 21 despite a forecast of high temperatures and dangerous conditions later that week. On November 23, as the winds increased, the fire escaped its boundaries and tore through nearby communities

Residents are glad to have been saved but expressed shock in media interviews that a controlled fire was permitted to cause such damage. Marjorie Stewart, a school dental therapist, whose home was destroyed, said: "I'm really angry with those who lit the fires. I hope they look after us because it's their fault, we've lost everything."

Like many others, Geoff and Nicole Holzer and their two young children received SMS safety advice too late before their home was engulfed by flames. Geoff said:

"I'm a bit disappointed about how the fire originated and hoping to get an answer why and some kind of result."

Under pressure to explain, state Liberal Premier Colin Barnett said he did not have all the answers for residents. Nevertheless, he claimed the fire was an accident that did not have to be blamed on anyone. "There has been pressure on residents in the area, there's huge pressure on firefighters and various agencies and probably a lot of accusations, blame and anger is present," he said.

Environment Minister Bill Marmion stated he was "happy to apologise for what went wrong" as he toured the affected regions but did not meet local residents who had lost their homes. "The buck does stop with me unfortunately," he said.

In an effort to placate residents, the government pledged a formal investigation into the fire, but the record of such inquiries has been to cover up the underlying responsibility of governments and the corporate profit system for the lack of adequate fire-fighting, fire safety and other emergency resources.

As another damage control measure, the government declared a state disaster, giving residents access to relief funds. Families who have lost their home are eligible for a \$3,000 emergency grant, while families with a damaged house are eligible for \$1,000. These are paltry sums for people who have lost all their possessions. The government said it would donate a further \$500,000 to the relief fund but this is grossly inadequate for a disaster expected to cost tens of millions of dollars.

Top fire-fighting officials sought to deflect responsibility. DEC Director-General Keiran McNamara said unseasonal wet weather had delayed the controlled burn program, which would normally be completed earlier in the year. The Fire and Emergency Service Authority (FESA), which oversees the state's fire services outside national parks, said it was not involved in supervising the fire.

According to a report delivered to the Western Australian parliament on November 24, many recommendations from an investigation into serious fires that destroyed 71 homes in the Perth Hills in February have not been implemented. The report on the state's readiness for the 2011-12 bushfire season said only 9 of the 55 recommended changes to fire management had been made in time for the official December 1 start of the season.

In a submission to the report, the United Fire Fighters Union expressed concerns about training and other aspects of the fire services. It said many personnel were volunteers who had other commitments, while firefighters who were willing to man trucks were refused overtime pay. As a result, some fire-fighting equipment was effectively being decommissioned due to a lack of personnel.

During the Perth Hills fires, a union spokesman said the city had run out of fire engines due to the number of major fires burning at once. There had been problems in supplying maps, radios, fuel and earthwork equipment, and some newer communities had shortages in overall firefighting equipment.

The results of the initial investigation by former Australian Federal Police chief Mick Keelty were delivered on August 17, although emergency departments and the DEC had access to his report a month earlier. His recommendations included education programs, changes in local fire planning and reformed organisation and management of emergency services.

Keelty's report was itself limited. It focussed on administrative and education reforms, not funding,

major overhauls of emergency services equipment and personnel numbers. Thirteen of his recommendations were aimed at the general public as part of a program of "shared responsibility."

The "shared responsibility" policy echoes the "stay or go" program, which was a major cause of some of the 173 deaths in the Victorian "Black Saturday" bushfires of February 2009. Under that policy, residents, rather than trained firefighters, decide whether to stay and defend their homes or not.

"Shared responsibility" risks causing a similar disaster if residents are encouraged and expected to take an active role in fire-fighting rather than leaving it to trained professionals. The policy has evolved as part of a wider cost-cutting process of shifting the costs of fire protection onto local residents.

Though a serious disaster, resulting in losses of life was avoided this time in Western Australia, the fires raise critical questions about future preparedness. Despite the terrible consequences of the 2009 Victorian bushfires, Australian governments, state and federal, have washed their hands of any responsibility to establish integrated evacuation programs, provide adequately equipped professional fire-fighting services and build community refuges and bushfire shelters.



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