

Australia: Blue Mountains fires ignited by power lines and military exercise

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Hundreds of Blue Mountains residents returned to their homes on Thursday after slightly milder weather and the determined efforts of physically exhausted members of the Rural Fire Service (RFS), the state's predominantly volunteer force, prevented a predicted fire-storm on October 23.

Relief that a major disaster had been temporarily averted, however, was tempered by revelations from RFS fire investigators that the still burning State Mine fire near Lithgow, the largest blaze in the state, had been ignited by an army live-fire exercise, and that arcing power lines had caused two other major Blue Mountains' fires and one near Port Stephens, north of Newcastle. The State Mine fire has so far incinerated almost 50,000 hectares.

The news cut across sensationalist reportage by the corporate media, whose knee-jerk response to every Australian bushfire disaster is to focus on "arsonists" and "cigarette-butt flickers" in an attempt to divert attention from government budget cuts that endanger the homes and lives of thousands of ordinary people.

After initially refusing to comment on the RFS report, the military finally acknowledged yesterday that it was responsible for the State Mine fire. Acting defence chief, Air Marshall Mark Binskin, apologised yesterday but downplayed the military's responsibility, saying "this was an accident as part of a training activity on a day there wasn't a fire ban."

An angry Blue Mountains mayor Mark Greenhill told ABC television that he was alarmed by the news and that the Australian military should not have been conducting live-fire exercises in the extreme weather conditions.

"It just shouldn't have happened," he said. "There's the damage it does in terms of the risks taken by the firefighters. There's the damage it does in terms of the costs to the community of fighting that fire, and let's not forget [the fire] is still going, it's still out there."

Fairfax Media reported yesterday that numbers of

Australian army firing ranges had failed to develop bushfire plans. An unnamed source close to the military explained: "There is just an amazingly casual approach to the whole thing, with no mitigation plans in place at all. They have known for a couple of years that these plans don't exist but they don't do anything about it because there is no money."

Internal army correspondence, leaked to Fairfax, indicated that the military's Directorate of Training Area Management knew that firing ranges across Australia had not implemented bushfire plans, contrary to directives in a 2011 training and fire safety manual.

The manual states: "Commanders are to balance the urgency of any planned live-fire activities against the level of risk of starting a wildfire or bushfire." Another section states that live-fire exercises should not be carried out without "an authorised operational imperative" if the fire danger is at a "high" level or above. The army has also been blamed over the past three months for igniting fires during military exercises in Townsville, Queensland, and at near Port Augusta in South Australia.

Earlier RFS reports found that two other Blue Mountains' fires—at Springwood and Mount Victoria—and one near Port Stephens, north of Newcastle, were ignited by power lines arcing in strong winds. More than 190 homes were incinerated and 109 badly damaged by the Springwood fire, which razed entire streets, seven homes were destroyed at Mount Victoria, and six houses hit near Port Stephens.

While the RFS has released few details about how the power lines ignited the NSW blazes, poorly maintained high-voltage power lines cause scores of serious fires each year in the state. Almost half of the fires in Victoria's Black Saturday disaster in 2009 that killed 173 people were sparked by poorly maintained power lines. From 2001 to 2008, power line inspections in Victoria were reduced in frequency from three to five years,

allowing private operators SPAustNet and Powercor to cut their operation and maintenance budgets by \$105 million and \$95 million respectively.

A royal commission into the Victorian disaster called for all single-wire earth return power lines to be replaced and high-voltage lines either replaced with insulated cables or placed underground. It warned that the number of fires caused by electricity failures “would increase” unless the state government and private distribution businesses took “urgent preventive steps.”

These recommendations were rejected out of hand as “too expensive” by the then Victorian Labor government, and have been similarly rejected by the current state Liberal government, which last year declared it would only replace one percent of its power-line network, or about 1,000 kilometres. Bushfire experts have warned that the situation threatens Victorian residents with another Black Saturday-scale tragedy.

Electricity distribution, including power lines and poles, is still a state-owned enterprise in NSW. Rather than upgrading the electricity grid to ensure the prevention of bushfires, consecutive state governments, Liberal and Labor alike, have been restructuring its operations and moving towards full privatisation.

October has seen the highest spring temperatures on record in NSW, with even more dangerous weather conditions and new fires predicted in the coming week. There are currently 73 fires still burning across the state, and 29 of these are uncontained.

The NSW bushfires that have destroyed hundreds of homes over the past week are a warning of what is to come as summer heat waves hit across Australia. Far from taking emergency action to boost inadequate fire services and address the underlying causes of fires, governments and the media are portraying bushfire as an unavoidable consequence of living in Australia.



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