

Australia: Winmalee fire survivors told authorities about power line dangers

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Two weeks after New South Wales was hit by unprecedented spring bushfires, most of the blazes have been brought under control, including those that hit several Blue Mountains communities, destroying over 200 homes.

Fire survivors continue to raise questions about overhead power line dangers, inadequate emergency relief by the state and federal governments and insufficient bushfire mitigation in the months prior to the fires. No additional information been released by the Rural Fire Service (RFS) on how power lines caused the Mt Victoria and Springwood fires in the Blue Mountains, or how an army live-fire exercise ignited the State Mine blaze near Lithgow.

Calls for placing electricity cables underground and other bushfire mitigation measures have been consistently voiced by residents in fire-prone districts. This issue and related concerns were, in fact, raised by Winmalee and Yellow Rock residents at a public meeting in mid-September. The packed meeting was held in Winmalee in the immediate aftermath of major fires that month and attended by over 300 local residents.

According to local media, ten people in attendance said that they had not received a Rural Fire Service emergency safety warning text message to take shelter from the approaching fires. Others voiced their concerns about a lack of hazard reduction burns in the area and the dangerous situation facing anyone trying to evacuate along the narrow road from the Yellow Rock community.

“It’s a one-way, one-road in and it has never received the recognition it deserves on that basis in terms of protection,” one person told the meeting. “I would hate to see a real emergency situation develop at Yellow Rock.”

Blue Mountains RFS district manager David Jones said he would consider holding a future meeting with Yellow Rock residents and advised them to lodge a “hazard complaint” with the fire service. Residents were told that only a few days each year were suitable for hazard reduction burns.

Another resident asked why overhead power lines were not being placed underground. He pointed out that the nearby Blue Mountains highway was being widened and that it would not be difficult to put the electricity cables underground at the same time. An Endeavour Energy spokesman responded by telling the meeting that this measure was too expensive. “It costs about 10 times more to put mains underground,” he said.

These concerns were further underlined by a “Four Corners” program screened on ABC television on October 28, which revealed that since the early 1970s, overhead power lines have been responsible for starting Australia’s most fatal fires.

Entitled “Fire in the Wire”, the documentary reported that Australian authorities and electricity companies—public and privately owned—have had detailed information for almost four decades about the serious dangers posed by arcing power lines but taken no effective preventative action.

Investigations following major fires in the state of Victoria in 1974, 1983 and Black Saturday 2009, which killed 8, 47 and 173 people respectively, revealed that a number of blazes were ignited by power-lines. According to the program, 161 of those killed during Black Saturday lost their lives because of fires sparked by power lines.

Andrew Watson for law firm Maurice Blackburn told “Four Corners” that the SPAusNet, one of Victoria’s private electricity suppliers, could have prevented the

Kilmore East inferno on Black Saturday if it had “undertaken some of the most basic precautions.” Watson is currently representing 10,000 fire survivors in legal action against SPAusNet—the largest case in the state’s history.

Another major Black Saturday blaze, the Murrindindi fire, which destroyed 500 homes and killed 40 people, was also caused by an electricity fault. Victorian police initially claimed it was the result of an arson attack and arrested Ron Philpott, a Country Fire Authority captain, who originally reported the blaze.

The police allegations and charges, which were later dropped following a 28-month investigation, were seized on by the media and government authorities to divert attention from the serious lack of emergency services personnel and fire mitigation and safety measures.

“Four Corners” criticised consecutive Victorian governments for not acting to mitigate the dangers posed by overhead power lines, but the program failed to examine the impact of electricity privatisation or fire-fighting budget cuts and job destruction. It only mentioned in passing recommendations made by the Victorian royal commission into Black Saturday for “undergrounding” power lines.

“This would solve the problem,” the documentary admitted, but dismissed the proposal as “prohibitively expensive” and suggested that Australian authorities should turn off electricity in fire-prone areas during bushfire danger days. This ‘cheaper’ proposal, however, means that residents will not be able to power emergency water pumps, and could seriously hamper communications and other fire fighting needs.

“Undergrounding” power lines was high on the list of priorities raised by Winmalee and Springwood residents who spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters last weekend.

Wayne told the WSWS: “I was somewhere else when the fires hit and couldn’t get in the area to see my daughter. That was very hard.

“I think they have to do more back burning and clearing the bush, and they should look into putting power underground. We have the technology but they’re not doing it now because it costs money. We have to look at different things to prevent such bushfires,” he added.

Adam, a teacher from Winmalee said: “The money

that’s been lost in the community because of the damage by the fires could have been better spent on underground power lines.

“They say they can’t do it because it would cost them too much money to outlay this, but if they were smart about it, they’d put the NBN [National Broadband Network] through at the same time. We have gas under the road and that works, why can’t the power lines be underneath?”

“There should have been back burning,” he added. “I think many houses would have been saved. I’m not talking about decimating the bush, but at least a 30- or 50-metre fire break.”

Glen, a 30-year resident of the area, said: “Some of these fires were caused by power lines close to trees. A friend of mine who lives out there said that branches hit the power line and the transformer exploded and sparked the fire. The lines should be underground but they won’t do that because they say it costs too much.”

Heather said: “Luckily our house didn’t burn down but we had to stay the night at a friends’ house. My main concern now is the asbestos and I hope they can control it. I’m very worried about the summer and I hope we have plans for it.”

Glennys, a local resident since 1976, said she was concerned about new unsafe areas opened for housing development.

“If you live here you have to expect fires. We have to think about where we live and I think some of the houses built in the last 20 years shouldn’t have been built in those locations. For example, part of Emma Parade where the street used to end has been extended and houses built on it.

“We also have to think what we build. I’m just in the process of replacing windows and I have to upgrade to fire resistant glass. Power lines need to be underground, the fire in Winmalee was caused by falling power lines... I believe in global warming and we need rational planning.”



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