

Scores of homes destroyed in Western Australian bushfires

Joe Lopez
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More than 50 homes were destroyed and one man died as an intense fire last Sunday swept through the Perth Hills area, about 40 kilometres northeast of Perth, the Western Australian state capital. The Perth metropolitan area experienced heat wave conditions, with temperatures hovering over 40°C, in the lead up to the fire.

The semi-rural suburbs of Stoneville, Parkerville and Mount Helena were the worst affected. The Perth Hills area fatality occurred in Hovea. A 62-year-old man suffered a suspected heart attack as he tried to protect his home from the approaching fire. Another man from Stoneville remains in a serious condition in Royal Perth Hospital after falling through his roof.

The fire reportedly began after a more than 30-year-old power pole collapsed on a large property in Parkerville, sparking a grassfire that quickly spread throughout the area. A faulty pole is also believed responsible for causing another fire in the western suburb of Jolimont, a day before the Perth Hills blaze. At one point, the Jolimont fire threatened a nearby rehabilitation hospital, a cancer hospice, a paraplegic residential hostel and a University of Western Australia research unit.

Western Power, Perth metropolitan's electricity supply service, is state-owned but the government claims that residents are responsible for the maintenance of "private" power poles on outer suburban homes and farms. The government wants owners made financially liable for any damage caused by failing to adequately maintain electricity poles. According to the *West Australian* newspaper, there are up to 200,000 "privately-owned" power poles across the state.

Ken Bowron, director of industry watchdog EnergySafety, told the media that Western Power was

only responsible for testing and inspecting electrical infrastructure when first activated on private property but there was "no ongoing requirement from that."

Widespread anger over this issue emerged following the Perth Hills fire. Several residents at a 150-strong community meeting last Tuesday asked why Western Power had no responsibility for the safety and maintenance of power lines. They wanted to know why utility providers did not provide this service, given the specialised nature and dangers involved, the lack of qualified private contractors and the costs involved.

Stoneville resident Matthew Leverington told the meeting: "It's frustrating me because [state authorities] will inspect a [swimming] pool gate that could save a child's life but you won't go to inspect a power pole that could save thousands of lives and homes."

Speaking on Australian ABC radio earlier this week, Western Australia's Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner Wayne Gregson suggested utility providers should assume some responsibility for the electricity infrastructure. "Is it fair and reasonable to expect an owner to be responsible for that type of infrastructure?" he asked.

This was categorically ruled out by Energy Minister Mike Nahan, a former chief of the Western Australian Chamber of Commerce. He proposed a policy revamp that threatens home and landowners with the possibility of heavy damage costs in any future fires caused by power lines.

Energy providers had "enough on their plate," he said, and should not take over the management of private power assets. "I can say categorically neither Western Power nor Horizon Power (which supplies energy in regional areas) will take on responsibility for the maintenance, inspections or upgrades of the poles," Nahan declared.

Successive Western Australian governments have run down maintenance and cutting costs as they move toward privatisation.

The sell-off of state-owned assets is being discussed by the current Liberal government, together with various austerity measures demanded by the financial elite following the state's recent loss of its AAA credit rating. The past year has seen a sharp fall in revenues and an increase in state debt, associated with the collapse of the mining investment boom.

Over the past two decades, state Liberal and Labor governments alike have privatised and corporatised sections of the energy supply sector. In 1995, the Court Liberal government carved up the State Energy Commission of Western Australia into separate gas and electricity utilities—Alinta Gas and Western Power.

In 2000, Alinta Gas was fully privatised. A year later, an incoming Labor government restructured Western Power, leading to the destruction of thousands of jobs. In October last year, Western Power axed 150 head office jobs with more positions slated to go in 2014.

The WA government also refuses to provide adequate funding for fire and emergency services, endangering the lives of thousands of people. Last year, it directed the Fire and Emergency Service Authority to reduce its annual operating costs by almost \$400,000. The authority responded by not filling vacant positions, increasing pressure on its already grossly underfunded services and its dependence on volunteer firefighters.

Around 400 firefighters, professional and volunteers, and about 100 appliances, including water-bombing planes and helicopters, finally contained the Perth Hills fires last Tuesday. Residents and clean up service workers now face the danger of dislodged asbestos fibre from fire damaged homes and buildings.

Heat-wave conditions and high winds continue to dominate most of southeastern Australia, with scores of homes and thousands of hectares incinerated by bushfires over the past week (see: "Heat wave and bush fires engulf southern Australia").

Twelve homes were destroyed in South Australia's Flinders Ranges, the Barossa Valley and the Murraylands regions on Friday and a woman died during major fires in the northern Grampians in western Victoria. Hundreds of Grampians residents had to spend the night in relief centres, sheltering from fires that have devastated 51,000 hectares and sent a

12-kilometre plume of smoke into the air.

Yesterday, a still uncontrolled bushfire continued in southern Bullsbrook, north of Perth, with residents warned to be ready to leave the area. With temperatures expected to soar again this weekend in Perth and surrounding regions, firefighters fear new fires will erupt.

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