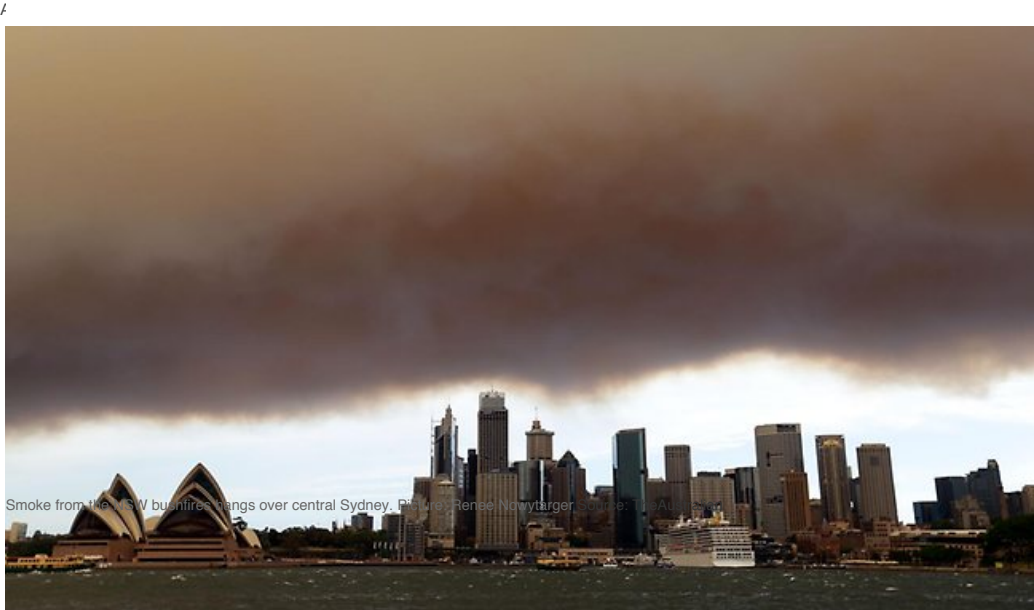


'Miracle' if lives not lost in NSW fires: premier

October 17, 2013 10:29PM



Smoke from the NSW bushfires hangs over central Sydney. Picture: Renee Nowyarger. Source: The Australian

IT will be miraculous if no lives are lost to bushfires on a difficult and dangerous night ahead in NSW, Premier Barry O'Farrell says.

Hundreds of properties are feared destroyed in bushfires around the state, with up to 30 known to be lost at Springwood, in the Blue Mountains.

Mr O'Farrell said that despite a change cooling the weather where fires were burning, the danger was not over.

"It has been a difficult, damaging and dangerous day and these conditions are not going to be over quickly," he told reporters at Rural Fire Service headquarters in Sydney today.

"Weather conditions are changing, it will take some days until we see the end of these fires.

"And I suspect that if we get through that without the loss of life we should thank God for miracles."

More than 90 fires were burning across NSW at 6.30pm (AEDT), 36 of them uncontained.

There are also unconfirmed reports of properties being lost at North Doyalson, on the Central Coast; at Lithgow; at Yanderra and Balmoral, in the Southern Highlands; and in Port Stephens, where a fire is burning near Newcastle Airport which has been closed.

Elsewhere in NSW, fires of grave concern to authorities are burning at Leppington, near Camden, west of Sydney, at South Nowra, on the south coast, and at Muswellbrook, in the Hunter Valley.

Six fires were of most concern, burning aggressively and causing destruction, RFS commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said.

"We have many hours yet still to run," he said.

"It is going to be a long, difficult and dangerous evening ahead for firefighters and obviously the communities in the path of these fires."

"If we get through today losing less than 100 homes, we'll have been very lucky," Rural Fire Service spokesman Anthony Clark said.

Meanwhile, a CSIRO expert has warned that loss of life is likely.

"History has shown us that on average one life is lost for every 17 houses," Justin Leonard, CSIRO's research leader for bushfire urban design, said.

"The majority of these lives are lost within a few hundred metres of homes."

He advised people to use their home as a refuge and not to flee at the last moment.

Firefighters are expecting a reprieve in the weather tomorrow, but warn the hot dry conditions are due back by the end of the weekend.

Mr Fitzsimmons said it was too soon to estimate how many properties had been lost, adding "we'll be counting properties in the dozens, if not the hundreds".

"We are talking about destructive fire grounds and some pretty extraordinary fire behaviour," he said.



Dan Weatherhead posted this view of the Springwood fire looking toward Winmalee from Warrimoo Oval. Picture: Twitter
Source: Twitter

And with the wind change altering the fire front, Mr Fitzsimmons expected communities on all sides of fires to be in danger.

"This is as bad as it gets," he said.

Infrastructure and roads have been damaged, and no one has yet had the chance to assess the damage caused to utilities like water treatment centres.

Mr O'Farrell said it was "far too early" to estimate the cost of repairing damage caused by the fire.

Late this afternoon the RFS reported there had been no lives lost in the fires to that point.

RFS Deputy Commissioner Rob Rogers said it had been a nightmare day.

"It's probably the most serious fire risk we've faced since the early 2000s," he told ABC Radio.

"... If we come out of this day without losing hundreds of homes we'll be very lucky."

He said some firefighters have suffered injuries, including one with burns.

TV footage showed homes burning near Springwood, fuelled by strong winds, as residents took refuge in a local country club.

"The most intense fire I've seen for a long time," a firefighter told Sky News.

GALLERY. The devastating NSW bushfires (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/gallery-e6f8g8zf-1226741883528>)

Firefighters had their eye on the weather, as a change that followed the 34-plus degree day gusted winds up to 90km/h.

"As that change comes through we're going to see fires burning on new fronts and communities to the north of these fires can expect to see a lot of fire, a lot of smoke," Mr Clark said this afternoon.

For more information on the NSW fires please call 1800 679 737, follow @NSWRFS on Twitter or check the NSW **Rural Fire Service Facebook page** (<https://www.facebook.com/nswrfs>) at <https://www.facebook.com/nswrfs>

Earlier this afternoon, 595 firefighters were battling 78 bush and grass fires, 31 of them uncontained, as they braced for a southerly change.

"Southwesterly wind change on track. Winds gusting up to 90km/hr. Erratic & dangerous conditions for next few hours," the RFS said on Twitter.

BUSHFIRE MAP: NSW Rural Fire Service current incident updates (<https://maps.google.com.au/maps?f=q&source=embed&hl=en&geocode=&q=http%3F%2Fwww.rfs.nsw.gov.au%2Ffeeds%2FmajorIncidents.xml&sl=-33.796924,150.922433&sspn=1.739179,2.469177&ie=UTF8&t=m&ll=-32.75825,144.113917>)

Mr Rogers confirmed the change could bring new drama.

"It's going to continue like this for ... three or four hours," he said.

"Then we're looking at a southerly change which is going to bring gusty south-westerlies which will turn the side of the fire into the head of the fire and bring us a whole new lot of drama."

The RFS said more than 165 firefighters were battling the Springwood blaze in deteriorating conditions, aided by aircraft.

Home lost (<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/bushfires/blue-mountains-father-loses-home-in-blaze/story-fngw0i02-1226741870599>)

A witness told ABC Radio he was standing across the road from a house in Springwood that was on fire.

"The rear is well and truly alight," he said.

"The firefighters are doing all they can to save it."

Springwood golf pro Joe Moore said he'd lost his house to the flames and had heard many more had also been destroyed.

"A big fire came up over the back of the golf club and with 100km/h winds it soon got out of hand," he told Sky.

"It's pretty horrific and the winds are still going, there's plenty happening but I think this might be the worst fire we have seen.

"Normally we have a bit more time and a bit more warning."

Mr Rogers told ABC Radio the strength of the wind in the Lithgow fire had grounded RFS aircraft.

Twitter users reported ashes and charred leaves falling to the ground as far away as Bondi Beach.

North of Newcastle, a fire breached containment lines at Heatherbrae, closing the Pacific Highway and forcing Newcastle airport to halt flights.

The RFS advised properties around Tomago Road, Cabbage Tree Road, Barrie Close and Williamstown Drive may be under threat.

Richard Jones, manager of Muree Golf Club, which is just north of the blaze, said there was "miles of smoke".

"It's just wild," he said. "I don't think it's crossed the road yet but it's not endangering anyone on the course at the moment.

"Firefighters are going up and down the street to the north east of us telling people to evacuate."

An emergency warning was also in place for a fire at Quin's Lane in South Nowra, on the south coast.

Mr Rogers said it was burning "extremely hard".

An emergency warning has also been issued for a grass fire burning around St James Road and St Davids Road at Varroville, near Camden, west of Sydney.

A fire burning in the Southern Highlands, near Balmoral and Yanderra, has closed the Hume Highway near Mittagong.

Residents in the Castle Rock area and Richlands Road west of Muswellbrook were being told to prepare for fire.

Firefighters from the ACT are on their way to help hard-pressed colleagues in NSW.

The ACT Rural Fire Service (ACTRFS) said it had received a request for help from the NSW Rural Fire Service.

It is deploying 13 ACTRFS units, made up of 10 fire appliances and three command vehicles, to assist in the Sydney basin.

Two strike teams, each with 25 firefighters comprising volunteers from the Parks Brigade, departed Canberra at 5.30pm (AEDT) for a deployment of up to five days.

Hot conditions today have been compounded by strong winds, with wind gusts of up to 70km/h bringing down powerlines and cutting power to 8700 homes west, south west and north of Sydney.

Endeavour Energy advised members of the public to stay well clear of fallen powerlines.

It also advised residents in Lithgow, where a bushfire was burning, that it might need to isolate parts of its network as the fire passes through.

In the Blue Mountains, power was cut to about 4500 homes and businesses in Katoomba, Winmalee and parts of Leura, Blackheath and Mt Victoria.

In the Macarthur region, crews were working to restore power to about 1600 homes and businesses.

In the Hawkesbury, strong winds interrupted electricity supplies to 1300 homes along the Hawkesbury River.

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