

NSW bushfires: dozens of homes destroyed, Sydney skies darkened

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Hundreds of homes may have been lost after New South Wales suffered one of its worst bushfire days in recent memory on Thursday.

Intense fires tore across south-eastern Australia in ferocious wind conditions and high temperatures, darkening Sydney's skies with smoke and ash.

Thousands of people have been evacuated as emergency warnings are in place for bushfires burning out of control near Lithgow and Springwood in the Blue Mountains, and Heatherbrae near Newcastle.

For the latest on the bushfire threat, follow ABC Emergency and the Rural Fire Service

Total fire bans were in place for areas including Greater Sydney, as well as the Central Ranges, North Coast and North Western districts.

Temperatures hit the mid-30s and wind gusts reached 90kph throughout the day.

"We are unclear yet as to how many properties have been lost, but it's expected by the time we finish counting, it will be at least in the hundreds," New South Wales Premier Barry O'Farrell said.

"It will take some days to see the end of these fires and I suspect if we get through that without the loss of life, we should thank God for miracles."

Key points:

- Thousands of people evacuated, total fire bans in place
- No fatalities so far
- Emergency warnings in Lithgow, Blue Mountains, Muswellbrook, Newcastle and Wylong
- Almost 100 fires across the state
- Cooler weather expected on Friday, but temperatures to soar on Sunday, Monday

At one point 95 fires were being tackled across the state, with dozens out of control.

'This is as bad as it gets'

NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said it had been a "very difficult and dangerous day" of "extraordinary fire behaviour", with blazes travelling vast distances due to the winds.

"This is as bad as it gets, you're talking destructive, damaging, and people losing everything they own," he told reporters, adding that it could be weeks before the fires were fully under control.

No fatalities have been reported so far, while just one firefighter has been injured.

However, Mr Fitzsimmons's deputy, Rob Rogers, said authorities are worried people could be inside the destroyed houses.

"We will be counting the toll of this [Friday] and indeed days to come, as far as the real impact on this fire," he said.

"We will be very lucky if we haven't lost at least a couple of hundred homes. The real fear, of course, is that there would be someone in them."

Springwood man Joe Moore said his house had been razed while an estimated 40 other homes had been lost in the village, though that figure could not be confirmed by officials.

"It's about as bad a situation as we could ever have hoped for," he said.

"It's one of those things, if you want to live up in the Blue Mountains it's a beautiful place to live, but it has the dangers of nature's ferocity like we had today."

The blaze was believed to have started when a power line came down in strong winds, according to media reports.



VIDEO: How the bushfires unfolded

Sydney health authorities issued a respiratory alert after a blanket of smoke settled over the city, bathing familiar landmarks including the Opera House and Bondi Beach in an otherworldly amber hue and causing ash to rain from the skies.

The plume was so thick it showed up on the nation's weather radar.

The winds forced the grounding of water-bombing firefighting aircraft and residents of the Blue Mountains were urged to stay off the roads to clear the way for emergency vehicles.

"The problem is when you've got aircraft over fires like that with [those] winds, a lot of the time they're just getting knocked around in the sky," RFS spokesman Joel Kursawe said, adding that embers were being carried up to six kilometres.

Mr Fitzsimmons said there would be a reprieve for fire crews on Friday with cooler, less breezy conditions expected, but the danger would ramp back up on Sunday and Monday when temperatures were due to soar once more.

The blazes follow Australia's warmest 12 months on record, with the previous summer witnessing an unprecedented heatwave, as well as bushfires and floods.

The worst bushfires in recent years devastated southern Victoria in 2009, razing thousands of homes and killing 173 people.

GALLERY: In pictures: NSW bushfires

ABC/wires

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