

## More homes threatened as hopes for rain recede

Tim Barlass, Lucy Carroll

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Fires were threatening more homes in Blue Mountains villages on Saturday as western Sydney faced blisteringly hot weather forecasts and residents from devastated towns came to terms with the loss of more than 200 houses.

As blazes raged for a third day, fires near Springwood and the Bells Line of Road were set to emergency status early on Saturday, but later downgraded to watch and act. Houses came under threat in Bell, Dargan, Berambing and Bilpin.

Rural Fire Service deputy commissioner Rob Rogers told residents in the villages on Saturday afternoon that it was too late to leave their properties and they should take shelter as the firefront approached.

"This fire is by no means contained. It's got absolutely kilometres and kilometres of fire front," he said.

The greater Sydney region was rated a very high fire danger and the Rural Fire Service has imposed a total fire ban until further notice.

Nepean health service said Springwood Hospital was evacuated on Saturday "in advance of predicted worsening weather conditions over the coming days", with 26 patients moved to Nepean Hospital until at least Wednesday.

Earlier forecasts of widespread rain as early as Monday have been pushed back to later in the week.

Temperatures are expected to remain in the 30s in Sydney's west, with predictions of 35 degrees at Penrith on Sunday, 38 degrees on Monday and 36 degrees on Tuesday.

"I expect continued difficult and challenging days as we move into the new week. I expect much of NSW to see high fire dangers on a number of days," RFS commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said.

The official NSW property toll is 208 homes destroyed and 122 damaged. A 63-year-old man has died fighting the fires. There have been 610 insurance claims for damage estimated at \$43 million, a number expected to rise significantly.

Fire has also crippled the Zig Zag Railway tourist attraction. The railway was, until Thursday, on the cusp of reopening train rides to the public after its most recent closure over safety concerns. Chief executive Michael Forbes said he was "bloody gobsmacked". "Everyone's sort of in shock," he said.

The Defence Department said it was investigating whether explosives tests conducted near Lithgow on Thursday caused the Blue Mountains bushfire, the largest of more than 80 fires that continue to burn.

Fairfax Media has also established a power line that caused a fire that burnt more than 200 homes in Springwood, Winmalee and Yellow Rock had been the subject of warnings from the local power company. NSW RFS has since confirmed this to be the case.

Stories of heroism, survival and despair were told as residents returned to blackened homes or houses miraculously spared.

The tiny community of Yellow Rock, at the heart of the devastation in the Blue Mountains, lost at least 48 houses on a count by Fairfax Media in three streets.

Steve Gibson, who moved into his home with fiancée Kaylee a week ago, saw the firefront approach as it was fanned by 60 km/h winds - and stayed to successfully defend the property. "I was in the backyard and the smoke came across the back of the ridge and in less than five minutes it got to here. The smoke got thicker and thicker. It was a strong, dry wind, straight across my backyard. The wind was changing direction off and on," he said.

"I had a hose then the water went ... I was pretty much using buckets out of the pool. The guy two doors down is a policeman, he told me about the fire pump across the road. We took a hose through the fence ... We defended our backyards and the neighbours' yards. \_\_\_\_\_"

Marion Taylor saw what was left of her home with 20 hectares of bush on Yellow Rock Road in what she calls "paradise" for the first time on Saturday. She surveyed the shell of her home wearing a polo shirt, jeans and trainers given to her by a male friend. The IT consultant was in Sydney at the time and her first thought was for her three dogs.

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She added: "Yellow Rock is a great place to live. There's some great people out here. Just as well, I think, because it's a pretty sad community right now."

NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell praised the work of the Rural Fire Service and announced disaster assistance for the bushfire crisis.

"It is gut-wrenching to see such high losses and our thoughts and prayers go out to the people of NSW who are suffering at this time."

Before touring the central coast by helicopter to inspect damage, Mr O'Farrell said the state and federal governments would provide disaster assistance to families, small businesses, farmers and councils. The relief would "cover everything from emergency cash assistance for families through to concessional loans to small business and farmers and financial assistance for councils".

Before the fire on the Bells Line of Road was upgraded, Mr Fitzsimmons warned: "The loss is considerable. Half a dozen fires are still at the watch and act alert level and that's because the fire grounds are still quite volatile."

"There are a lot of back-burning operations going on and there is a lot of work to do. The optimism we had for widespread rain seems to be disappearing, And at best we're talking about showers across different areas later in the week."

It has also been revealed that among those to have lost their homes are five serving NSW Police officers including Paul Bousfield, Chairperson of the NSW Police Legacy.

Police Association President, Scott Weber, confirmed all five were back on duty, on Saturday.

“They were out there protecting the community when their homes were burning and they’re still out there now making sure everyone’s safe. They have nowhere to go home to, no clothes or anything. It won’t have sunk in yet.”

Police told residents returning to damaged homes to be wary of asbestos. Debris should not be disturbed if houses were built before 1987.

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/weather/more-homes-threatened-as-hopes-for-rain-recede-20131019-2vtls.html>*