

Red October

Taken in Blackheath looking west on Thursday 17 October 2013 toward the State Mine and Mt York fires.
Photo by Gary Hayes

“About as bad as it gets” – that’s how the recent fire threat was described by Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons.

After the warmest winter on record, and without any substantial rain for many months, October saw conditions deteriorate further and a number of significant fires start.

The most destructive of these was a fire which destroyed 193 homes and damaged 109 others around Springwood, Winmalee and Yellow Rock in the Blue Mountains. The Linksvie Road fire started on Thursday 17 October and spread under strong and gusty winds.

A fire at Mount Victoria destroyed seven homes that same afternoon.

Further north, the State Mine fire spread quickly from the outskirts of Lithgow towards

the community of Bilpin on the Bells Line of Road. This fire burnt more than 50,000 hectares and destroyed three homes and seven businesses and sheds. It was contained nearly two weeks later.

In the Southern Highlands, a fire threatened the community of Balmoral, destroying two homes and closing roads for several days.

The Central Coast was also affected by fires during October, including the Rutleys

Road fire which impacted on the community of Catherine Hill Bay, destroying historic buildings and part of the town’s iconic jetty.

At Port Stephens, a fire spread from Heatherbrae to Williamtown, closing Newcastle Airport and damaging a number of homes and businesses. Earlier in the month, homes at Fingal Bay and Salt Ash were also threatened.

At the height of the fires, thick smoke filled the skies over Sydney in a sight not seen for many years. NASA even reported seeing the smoke from the fires from space.

In recognition of the threat, and with conditions set to deteriorate, the Premier declared a State of Emergency. A number of Section 44 declarations were also in place.

Preparations for 23 October

With five large fires running and very hot fire weather due for the 23 October, the Service made a concerted attempt to warn the public of the dangers.

Communities in fire affected areas were asked to leave early, all non-essential travel was kept to a minimum and restrictions on heavy vehicle movements in the Blue Mountains were in place.

All schools in the Blue Mountains LGA were closed for the day of 23 October 2013 as were National Parks across the State. Residents of nursing homes residents in Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury and Southern Highlands were relocated to areas well away from the firegrounds. Numerous Evacuation Centres were also opened including Lithgow, Springwood, Winmalee and Lake Macquarie.

An additional 1,600 firefighters were deployed or placed at staging areas and aircraft were strategically placed across the State.

An overarching Incident Management Team was established, under the control of Deputy Commissioner Rob Rogers, to coordinate the local IMTs across the Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury.

There was a very real potential for fires to quickly impact on communities including the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, western Sydney and Southern Highlands. The Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons warned people that the safest option was to leave early in the day.

"Whilst we can do everything we can," he said, "do not wait for a fire truck to get into your driveway; do not rely on a fire truck coming to your home; do not rely on a message; do not rely on a knock on the door.

We will do everything we can, but it would be wrong of me to provide a guarantee that we will deliver on providing a truck to every home, a message to every person. It is simply something we cannot guarantee, but we will do our absolute darnedest."

October 23

Overnight rain dampened some of the fire activity but there were still a number of Emergency Warnings issued on October 23 and some communities came under direct threat. Importantly there were no deaths, injuries or property lost on that day as had been feared. The many fires already running did not expand.

The extraordinary efforts of the Remote Area Firefighting Teams (RAFT) working in the fire-affected areas of the Blue Mountains were credited with the success of that day.

"It was really the RAFT crews who made a difference that day," said Deputy Commissioner Rob Rogers.

Information flow

Between 13 and 26 October, the NSW RFS website received a staggering 5.7 million views, with 14.1 million page views. The Service's Facebook community grew from around 120,000 people to 280,000. The Fires Near Me smartphone apps were downloaded nearly 200,000 times.

Commissioner Fitzsimmons praised the work of firefighters from all agencies, as well as other emergency management agencies during the crisis.

"We've got the best firefighters in the world... they are second to none," he said.

A full report of the fires in October 2013 with detailed incident information will be

available in the next issue of the *Bush Fire Bulletin*.

A team effort

More than 1,300 firefighters from all agencies were deployed each day of that fortnight in addition to 148 NSW RFS Strike Teams. There were over 630 aircraft taskings in the period.

Support from interstate was fast and effective. Victoria provided the most number of personnel (726) followed by South Australia (374) and ACT (133). Support was also received from Queensland, West Australia and New Zealand.

Building Impact Assessment (BIA) teams visited all the firegrounds within days of the fires throughout September and October 2013. The BIA report was issued in mid-November 2013 showing the following figures.



Fires raging close the St Columba's High School in Winmalee on October 19, 2013. Photo by Laura Tunstall Channel 9.

Bush Fire Building Impact Assessment: Statistics for August - December 2013

Month	Fire Name (Local Government Area)	House (Habitable Dwelling)	
		Damaged	Destroyed
September	Hawkesbury Road (Winmalee)	1	0
September	Grange Avenue, Marsden Park (Blacktown)	1	1
September	Shallow Bay (Great Lakes)	1	0
September	Barrenjoey Headland (Pittwater)	2	0
September	Tickner Road, Castlereagh (Penrith)	3	0
October	Webbs Creek (Hawkesbury)	1	2
October	Brownes Road, Salt Ash (Port Stephens)	2	4
October	Hank Street (Port Stephens)	6	0
October	Hall Road, Balmoral (Wingecarribee)	2	2
October	Ruttleys Road, (Wyang)	7	4
October	Linksvie Road, Springwood (Blue Mountains)	146	195
October	State Mine Fire (Lithgow)	1	5
October	Mt York Road, Mt Victoria (Blue Mountains)	3	10
December	Boland's Fire (Cowra)	0	1
	Total	176	224

Public Information Statistics for 13-26 October

	13-26 October	17 October
Emergency Alert	72 campaigns 418,247 messages sent	39 campaigns, 306,379 messages sent
NSW RFS website	5.7m visitors 14.1m page views	869,544 visitors 2.3m page views
NSW RFS Facebook	108.4m impressions 45.6m people reached 147,704 new likes 1.2m mentions of bush fires	22m impressions 8.3m people reached 74,714 new likes
NSW RFS Twitter	24.2m impressions 18,300 retweets of NSW RFS 470m impressions of #nswfires	3.4m impressions 4,500 retweets of NSW RFS 16,291 tweets with #nswfires 50.3m impressions of #nswfires
Bush Fire Information Line	46,545 calls to BFIL 18,041 of these answered by BFIL operators	13,097 calls to BFIL 4,480 of these answered by BFIL operators
MyRFS volunteer website	18,454 visits 98,266 page views	2,869 visitors 14,349 page views
Fires Near Me smartphone application	188,833 new downloads	28,000 new downloads 219,000 fire searches per hour at peak
Major Fire Updates	1020 updates posted 340 at Emergency Warning status	161 updates posted 124 at Emergency Warning status