



RFS

Media release

Five years on from Black Summer – a time to reflect and get ready

19 December 2024

As we mark the fifth anniversary of the tragic loss of two of our own, Andrew O'Dwyer and Geoffrey Keaton, we also reflect on one of the most devastating chapters in our history — the 2019/20 Black Summer bush fires.

The Christmas and New Year period was marked by extreme fire behaviour and profound loss, remaining indelibly etched in the collective memory of our state and nation.

The largescale operational response saw the tireless efforts of thousands of RFS members and contributions from interstate and international partners come together, along with the resilience of communities across the state.

More than 5.5 million hectares burned across NSW, claiming 26 lives, including the tragic loss of four dedicated NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) members (Andrew O'Dwyer and Geoffrey Keaton from Horsely Park Brigade, Samuel McPaul from Morven Brigade and Colin Burns from Belowra Brigade) and three American aircrew (Ian McBeth, Paul Hudson and Rick DeMorgan Jr).

The impact and tragedy of the season saw an international fundraising response with more than \$100 million raised for the RFS and Brigades Donations Trust, which has been used to expedite the rollout of helmets, respiratory protection, and other equipment for volunteer firefighters, along with the establishment of the RFS Benevolent Fund, to support members and their families in the future.

While the 2019/2020 bush fires destroyed more than 2,400 homes in NSW alone, since then, significant progress has been made in improving fire mitigation, response capabilities, and community awareness.

Commissioner of the RFS, Rob Rogers, said it is important to pay tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice and honour the resilience of affected communities.

"The Black Summer bush fires were an unprecedented tragedy. We mourn the loss of lives, especially those of our brave RFS volunteers and aircrew who gave everything to protect our communities. Their courage and selflessness will never be forgotten," Commissioner Rogers said.

"With the summer ahead, it is crucial for all of us to remain vigilant. Prepare your homes, update your bush fire survival plan and stay informed. Live bush fire ready.

"The Black Summer bush fires tested us in ways we could never have imagined.

"We saw unprecedented fire behaviour, destruction and loss, but we also witnessed the extraordinary dedication of our members and the support of people from across Australia and the world.

"We remember our fallen colleagues with deep sadness and pride. Their sacrifices remind us of the importance of the work we do and why we all must remain vigilant and prepared as we face future fire seasons."