



NSW on fire

The bushfires of late 2019 and early 2020 devastated the east coast of NSW from Tweed Valley in the north to Bega and Merimbula in the south, across the Shoalhaven and Southern Highlands and down to the Murrumbidgee, resulting in a natural disaster being declared across much of the state.

Many of our local health districts were impacted by the fires; the Currowan fire raged for 74 days, burning almost half a million hectares of bushland and destroying 89 homes in the Conjola area, decimating parts of the Shoalhaven.

The 512,000-hectare Gosper's Mountain fire entered the Hawkesbury, Blue Mountains and Lithgow areas of the Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District while Murrumbidgee Local Health District saw 185 properties destroyed, a further 50 damaged, and more than 750 rural landholders impacted. In Southern NSW Local Health District, the fires claimed seven lives; Batemans Bay and Moruya hospitals came under direct threat, and 280 homes and several communities, including Cobargo, were decimated.

NSW Health staff rose to the challenges of this natural disaster with skill, passion and strength, not only caring for patients in emergency departments and temporary emergency evacuation centres, but also evacuating hospitals and aged care facilities, and volunteering with the Rural Fire Service; fighting fires in their own communities and battling personal property loss.

Supporting a whole of government response

NSW Health activated the NSW HEALTHPLAN to coordinate the health response under emergency management arrangements. It detailed the coordination of all health resources for the prevention, preparation, response, and recovery from the impact and effects of a health emergency.

During this activation:

- an Incident Management Team under the direction of the State Health Services Functional Area Coordinator was embedded at the State Health Emergency Operations Centre
- Health Liaison Officers deployed to state and local emergency operation centres to act as a conduit of information between NSW Health and partner agencies
- more than 76 staff from unimpacted areas were deployed to provide assistance and relief to staff in bushfire-affected communities.

The Incident Management Team, working alongside NSW Ambulance, coordinated the evacuation of health facilities within districts impacted by the fires, and liaised closely with the Australian Government Department of Health to support evacuation and relocation of residential aged care facilities. The Patient Transport Service assisted more than 690 evacuations and repatriations of non-ambulatory people, working close to fire zones in extreme conditions.

Along with the Australian Defence Force and Australian Medical Assistance Teams, NSW Health staff supported displaced communities through mobile teams and established a self-sufficient field hospital.

A physical and emotional toll

The physical and mental health impacts on our fire-ravaged communities have been significant and distressing. In response, the NSW Government announced a recovery package that included \$14.8 million to recruit 30 new Bushfire Recovery Mental Health Clinicians in fire-affected districts. These positions worked closely with primary health initiatives, community and welfare agencies, to provide:

- psychological first aid
- home visits to vulnerable and isolated communities
- education about self-care strategies
- clinical support and counselling.

Mental Health Directors worked with their counterparts in the Department of Education to coordinate targeted responses to the needs of children and adolescents in bushfire-affected districts. All schools affected by bushfires received access to enhanced counselling services.

The numbers at a glance

November 2019 to February 2020

- NSW Ambulance responded to almost 30,000 emergency calls about asthma and breathing problems.
- More than 14,140 unplanned presentations to 67 emergency departments were for asthma and breathing problems.
- Approximately 900,000 P2 masks were distributed from the Commonwealth to health facilities, evacuation centres, Aboriginal Medical Services and community pharmacies in bushfire-affected areas.
- More than 4000 childcare centres were sent information on reducing the health risk of bushfire smoke.

NSW Health

- ✓ Liaised with the Department of Education on bushfire smoke information for schools.
- ✓ Distributed public health messages on ways to reduce exposure to bushfire smoke.
- ✓ Provided health alerts and information to general practitioners, pharmacists, childcare centres, and parents of young children and infants.

Our districts' disaster recovery and mental health teams, including dedicated Bushfire Recovery Mental Health Clinicians, continue to address community needs and are actively involved in the recovery effort; partnering with multiple service agencies to implement the recovery process, and remaining embedded within areas of need.





Teams from less-affected local health districts mobilised to support the delivery of health services in fire-affected areas, with staff including social workers, occupational therapist, counsellors and nurses quickly deployed to assist their colleagues across the state.

Left to right: Dr Justine Douthwaite, Elliott Williams, Kate Galbraith and Maureen Elliot on deployment from Northern Sydney Local Health District with Jenny Malone from Murrumbidgee Local Health District.

Frontline support provided by our agencies

HealthShare NSW Food and Patient Support Services teams provided 'make ready' services to help hospitals re-open their doors during the fires. In the worst hit areas, teams worked extra hours, organised food supplies and even hosed down sites. Linen and critical supplies were packed and delivered ahead of the fires. Emergency supplies, including P2 masks were rapidly delivered across the state, while the Logistics Team monitored conditions to ensure staff safety. Health Pathology NSW ensured pathology samples got through bushfire areas when air services and roads were cut, sometimes under police escort.

Time for our districts to rebuild

Minor works were undertaken at more than 80 health facilities and more than 90 NSW Ambulance stations.

Health Infrastructure worked with Infrastructure NSW and local health districts to provide practical assistance for evacuated and recommissioned facilities; carrying out repairs, maintenance and assessment of impacted assets, and assisting with longer-term resilience planning for energy supply and water recycling. Cleaners and other support staff assisted with recommissioning of facilities that were closed or impacted by fires. All patients and residents returned to evacuated facilities by 29 January 2020.

The response continues

NSW Health commenced development of nationally consistent monitoring and public information on air quality in Australia, and led a whole of NSW Government submission to the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry: *Health impacts of exposure to poor levels of air quality resulting from bushfires and drought*. The Acting Executive Director of Health Protection NSW appeared as a witness to the inquiry on 12 June 2020.

NSW Health provided a submission to the NSW Government-commissioned independent inquiry into the 2019-20 bushfire season led by Professor Mary O'Kane and former NSW Police Deputy Commissioner, Dave Owens. This inquiry will provide input to NSW ahead of the next bushfire season. NSW Health also responded to the Royal Commission into national Natural Disaster Arrangements established in response to the extreme bushfire season of 2019-20.