

Submission  
No 32

**INQUIRY INTO HEALTH IMPACTS OF EXPOSURE TO  
POOR LEVELS OF AIR QUALITY RESULTING FROM  
BUSHFIRES AND DROUGHT**

**Organisation:** Australian Education Union New South Wales Teachers  
Federation Branch

**Date Received:** 13 March 2020

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## New South Wales Teachers Federation

a branch of the Australian Education Union  
AEU NSW Teachers Federation Branch ABN 86 600 150 697



13 March 2020

In reply please quote: 183/2020/KM/jg

The Director  
NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 2  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000

By email: [portfoliocommittee2@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:portfoliocommittee2@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: Inquiry into the health impacts of exposure to poor levels of air quality resulting from bushfires and drought**

I refer to the attached submission re the Inquiry into the health impacts of exposure to poor levels of air quality resulting from bushfires and drought for your consideration.

Please direct your inquiries about this submission to \_\_\_\_\_, Research/Industrial Officer.  
\_\_\_\_\_ can be contacted on \_\_\_\_\_.

Yours sincerely,

**John Dixon**  
**General Secretary**

Attachment



**AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION  
NEW SOUTH WALES TEACHERS FEDERATION BRANCH**

SUBMISSION TO

**PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE 2 – LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

ON

**INQUIRY INTO THE HEALTH IMPACTS OF EXPOSURE TO POOR  
LEVELS OF AIR QUALITY RESULTING FROM BUSHFIRES AND  
DROUGHT**

Authorised by

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✓ **John Dixon**  
**General Secretary**  
**AEU NSW Teachers Federation**

13 March 2020

## **Submission**

### **Introduction**

The Australian Education Union NSW Teachers Federation Branch (Federation) represents teachers in all public education worksites in NSW. The current financial membership totals over 61,000 practicing teachers and student teacher members.

Federation is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to this very timely inquiry on behalf of members across the state.

Responding to the immediate threat of fire was sadly a focus of the summer months for many of our school and TAFE communities. Additionally, many other schools and colleges away from the fire fronts were forced to take extreme measures to alleviate the hazardous levels of air pollution from bushfire smoke on students and staff.

While most teachers and students have the option of spending at least part of their day inside, on a typical day they also are required to spend a significant amount of time outdoors, including sport, recess and lunch, etc.

Federation members in areas that were exposed to bushfire smoke, after a period of playground duty for example, reported various symptoms, including headaches, irritation to the eyes, nose and throat and breathing difficulties. The symptoms were worse for staff and students with existing diagnosed respiratory conditions.

Many teachers and students were unable to escape the hazardous air even inside classrooms and libraries as the smoke infiltrated buildings. Air-conditioning, in those buildings where it was available, was not capable of keeping the polluted air out.

### **Department of Education response**

Unfortunately, while the Department of Education's advice to schools that were directly impacted by fires was effective and timely, its response to the associated air quality hazard was not.

On 19 November 2019 Deputy Secretary Murat Dizdar issued advice to all schools by way of a one page factsheet '*Air quality considerations for schools during bushfires*' Version 1 (Attachment A).

However by that time, many parts of the state had already experienced several weeks and in other cases months of very poor air quality, and indeed, entire regions of schools had temporarily ceased operations due to hazardous smoke from bushfires. The original version of the Department's factsheet also inadequately addressed staff wellbeing.

The factsheet was later updated to include more substantial references to staff (See Version 3- Attachment B).

The Department's advice for schools was to minimise exposure by cancelling outdoor activities, keeping staff and students indoors for recess and lunch breaks and monitoring the air quality of the local area.

However, the latter suggestion is not a simple task when in many localities no air monitoring systems are in place. Furthermore no clear guidelines exist to inform schools what levels of air pollution are considered so hazardous as to trigger a particular action as spelled out above. School communities were left completely in the dark on how to approach the situation.

Many schools do not have filtered air-conditioning. Indeed, even in circumstances where staff and students do have the option of staying indoors with filtered air to avoid the smoke, there are work

health and safety risks associated with extended periods of playground duty with hundreds of students in classrooms for up to 6 and a half hours continuously.

The resulting additional supervision required keeping students indoors resulted in new work health and safety risks in many cases for staff who were not afforded a break. The situation was exacerbated when teachers were required to also cover the supervision of their colleagues forced to take sick leave to avoid exposure at work.

Even where the air-conditioning was such that it improved the air quality in certain school buildings, the risk was not reduced sufficiently. Students and staff opening and closing doors to exit and enter rooms to attend the toilets, or change classes, for example, was a significant factor in polluted air entering the classrooms.

The Department further advised in its factsheet that: *"In extreme situations where the entire school premises is heavily affected by smoke, the Principal should contact the Director Educational Leadership (DEL) and discuss possible alternative arrangements for staff and students.....This may include relocating in the local area where there is greater protection from the smoke."*

No clear advice or guidelines were provided to schools about how they or their DEL might determine an extreme situation. The example provided of alternative arrangements for staff and students was far too vague for schools and DELs to make a decision quickly and appropriately, particularly when parents and guardians need to be kept informed too.

Teachers who individually contacted the Department's Incident Report and Support Hotline were given no advice and were just referred to the Department's Health and Safety email.

### **Federation's response**

Work Health and Safety laws apply not only to the workers in our schools and TAFE colleges but also the students in their care as well as volunteers in our schools.

Members who contacted either their local Organiser or the Federation's Professional Support section with concerns about the impact of air quality were directed to follow the Department's policies in relation to work health and safety procedures.

As per the Department's air quality factsheet, members with a diagnosed breathing condition are at particular risk, and were advised to consider whether the air quality was better at home or elsewhere than at their workplace. Federation members who experienced symptoms of exposure to bushfire smoke at work were urged to contact the Department's Health and Safety Directorate via the Incident Report and Support Hotline in the first instance.

Members who continued to experience difficulties with air pollution at their school were assisted to work through the Department's Work Health and Safety Issue Resolution procedures in conjunction with their Workplace Committees to escalate the issue of hazardous bushfire smoke. A detailed case study can be found below.

### **Unions leading the response**

The unprecedented scale of the bushfires and the associated smoke revealed a dearth of information from government and employers about the risks to workers from air pollution. SafeWork NSW, the state's regulatory authority on health and safety maintains a *Code of Practice: Managing The Work Environment and Facilities*. Despite being updated as recently as August 2019, it contains no mention of outdoor air quality, nor any guidelines as to exactly when workers should cease outdoor work.

The union movement has led from the front in responding to this summer's catastrophic events, not just by providing direct support to affected workers but also in calling for government cuts to fire-

fighting resources to be immediately reversed and for greater protection for workers in extreme weather conditions including hazardous air pollution.

The ACTU very quickly developed air pollution advice for workers with clear reference to work health and safety regulations and employer responsibilities (Attachment C).

The ACTU's advice to workers is far more explicit than the Department's, recommending that where the air quality index exceeds 150 (very poor/unhealthy), steps to minimise exposure should be taken to locate work inside where the air is filtered. The ACTU does not recommend the use of masks as the fit and type of respirator requires expert advice.

Federation also notes the outstanding leadership provided by Unions NSW to provide advice to workers in response to the hazardous levels of air pollution experienced throughout the bushfire emergency. We look forward to the NSW government's response to the recommendations of Unions NSW's "*Hazardous air quality: The New Normal*" discussion paper (Attachment D).

### **Case study – Mid North Coast region – November 2019**

By November, much of the mid North Coast (the Hastings and Nambucca Valleys in particular), was impacted by smoke due to fires burning locally from July onwards. The air quality was so poor throughout the second half of last year that the NSW Department of Environment was forced to install an air quality monitoring device at Port Macquarie.

This device allowed Federation members in local schools to check the air quality index during the worst days, and cross reference that with NSW Health Air Quality Index and activity guide website.

Having tried the obvious risk management procedures at a local level, on 14 November, Federation members in those schools responded to the continuing difficulties experienced for staff and students by implementing the Department's Work Health and Safety Issue Resolution Procedures.

To supplement the details provided to the Department's Health and Safety Directorate in the school's Issue Resolution notice, one member wrote: "*This morning the smoke alarm in our Library went off resulting in the local Fire Brigade attending the school. We are a non-airconditioned school and I have attached the website that gives current air pollution levels for Port Macquarie. Currently it is at 3661 and hazardous levels are over 200. Of the 18 teachers questioned - 17 believe the school should be closed and 1 believes all children should be sent home and we should be on minimal supervision.*"

A member at another school wrote: "*The current air quality due to the bushfires remains a significant concern despite local procedures put into place to manage the risk. A number of students, staff and parents have raised concerns over the past week and we are seeking the assistance of the WHS Directorate to advise of additional strategies including the potential to cease operations. Many concerns raised include personal health concerns with regards to sore throats, stinging eyes and headaches.*"

For the members in those schools it was very difficult, at least initially, accessing additional support from the Department. It was difficult to get the right phone number to call in the Health and Safety Directorate and when they finally were able to speak to someone, they were very slow to act.

The contact person was based in Sydney which presented a particular challenge when that person made a trip to the region and his plane couldn't land, ironically, due to very poor air quality.

Significantly, following the implementation of the Issue Resolution Procedures, the Department made the decision to cease operations in all schools in Port Macquarie. This was the first time the Department acknowledged the risk posed by the poor air quality as a result of the bush fires.

At the same time the Department's advice to schools in the neighbouring Nambucca Valley which was experiencing the same level of hazardous air quality but which did not have the benefit of an air quality monitoring device in close proximity, was for the principal to go and buy face masks for all staff and students. This idea presents a number of issues, namely that evidence of the efficacy of facemasks is mixed at best, and the cost borne presumably by the school of hundreds of face masks.

However, aware of what had occurred in Port Macquarie, the members in the Nambucca Valley responded to the Department saying that this was an unreasonable approach and asked why the same strategy that was used in Port Macquarie was not implemented in their area. Following this, the Department made the decision to also cease operations in all schools in the Nambucca Valley.

### **Climate emergency**

The sad reality is that unless all levels of government commit to urgent action to address this climate emergency, bushfire seasons are going to continue to become longer and more intense and the associated hazards of bushfire smoke is not going away any time soon.

There is an urgent need for the government to work with the Department of Education to develop clear risk assessment protocols and processes which are to be implemented when there is evidence of poor air quality. This would include the Department providing the capacity for immediate local air quality testing and advice on when it would be appropriate to cease operations based on the results of such testing.

Federation will continue to work with members in schools, colleagues across the union movement and the Department to ensure staff and students are provided with a safe school environment.