

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

**Organisation:** Australian Services Union NSW & ACT (Services) Branch  
**Date Received:** 20 March 2020

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20 March 2020

Chair of Portfolio Committee No. 2 – Health  
The Hon Greg Donnelly MLC  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

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

Dear Mr Donnelly

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

Please find the Australian Services Union NSW & ACT (Services) Branch submission to the inquiry into the health impacts of exposure to poor levels of air quality resulting from bushfires and drought.

Yours sincerely

**Natalie Lang**  
**Branch Secretary**  
**Australian Services Union NSW & ACT (Services) Branch**



**Australian Services Union  
NSW & ACT (Services) Branch**

**ASU Submission**

***Health impacts of exposure to poor levels of air quality  
resulting from bushfires and drought***

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<b>Date:</b>	20 March 2020

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## **Introduction**

### **The Australian Services Union and our members:**

The Australian Services Union NSW & ACT (Services) Branch (the ASU) represents workers across a range of industries.

ASU members work at Sydney Water, Water NSW, Hunter Water Corporation, Veolia Water, and in emerging smaller water companies.

We also represent senior and salaried workers across the NSW public transport system in Sydney Trains, NSW Trainlink, State Transit Authority, Roads and Maritime Services, Transport for NSW, Harbour City Ferries, ARTC and other transport agencies.

ASU members also work in administrative, clerical and service roles in the airlines, travel, shipping and information technology industries.

We have significant membership in the community and disability sectors, the ASU NSW & ACT (Services) Branch represents workers throughout the community and disability services non-government sector.

### **Inquiry Terms of Reference related to work of ASU members**

Our submission will address the terms of reference (TOF) where the experience of ASU members will be of relevance and assistance to the Committee in its Inquiry. Those TOF include:

1. The health impacts of exposure to poor levels of air quality resulting from bushfires and drought including:
  - (b) the impact on people who are exposed to poor outdoor air quality in the workplace;
  - (c) the long term impacts of exposure; and
  - (d) the effectiveness of various protective materials and strategies to mitigate the health impacts of exposure.
2. The effectiveness of the NSW Government to plan for and improve air quality including:
  - (b) the provision of various protective materials including face masks and air purifiers;
  - (d) the suitability of work health and safety regulations, industrial provisions and related guidelines; and
  - (e) the capacity to response within existing resources and ongoing efficiency dividends.
3. Any related matters

## **Health impacts on outdoor workers of exposure to poor quality air from bushfires**

Of relevance to this Inquiry is ASU members who are employed in industries where the majority of working hours are worked outdoors. Specifically, it is ASU members employed by Sydney Water whose role it is to repair and maintain Sydney Water's water supply infrastructure who experienced the greatest exposure to hazardous air quality during the recent summer of bushfires and associated smoke.

Sydney Water employees are required to carry out a range of duties and responsibilities in the upkeep of Sydney's water supply, including the urgent repair of water mains and pipes to ensure water is available to firefighters fighting bushfires. Consequently, it is often unrealistic to reschedule this work until the air quality improves or is less hazardous. In these circumstances it is essential workers are provided with personal protective equipment (PPE) to ensure the risk to their health is reduced or preferably eliminated. The PPEs needed by workers exposed to poor air quality, such as outdoor Sydney Water employees, are masks that filter out the air particles that are hazardous to their health. It is masks rated P2 that are recommended in these conditions as they are the only masks that can filter out a meaningful level of air pollution.

During the most recent period of poor air quality resulting from bushfires ASU members were advised by their employer, Sydney Water, to use the dust masks they regularly use for protection in dusty workspaces. The rating of these dust masks was not made clear to workers who were not informed if the masks were rated P1 or P2. Workers should be provided with and informed about the PPEs that are the most effective for the nature of the work and the hazard associated with the work. Workers should also be trained in how to fit and wear the masks to ensure they have an airtight seal on the face to maintain efficacy.

ASU members received limited information from Sydney Water advising them of the Air Quality Index (AQI) on particular days or the level of risk associated with the poor air quality during the recent period of poor and hazardous air quality. Sydney Water employees were advised to speak with their managers if they experienced any respiratory issues during the days of hazardous air quality. Sydney Water employees did not receive any advice or information about health checks for those who worked outdoors on the most heavily polluted days.

The increased level of air pollutants and the increased number of days with high levels of air pollution has caused ASU members concern about their ongoing respiratory health. The changes to air quality in NSW require a review of current standards, guidelines and rules that regulate worker health and safety related to poor air quality.

As the workplace environment changes employers need to assess PPEs to ensure they continue to be effective and are fit for purpose. The respiratory health of workers who are exposed to hazardous air quality should be assessed and monitored for both short term and long-term effects. Protocols should be established to ensure that any decline in lung function or lung condition are identified and treated.

The ASU (NSW & ACT) Services Branch supports the proposal from Unions NSW that Work Health and Safety rules should be updated to directly reference health risks of working in bushfire smoke. SafeWork NSW and WHS rules should introduce a new set of obligations on employers when AQI exceeds 150. The details of the Unions NSW recommended rule changes are listed in their publication '*Hazardous Air Quality: The New Normal?*', which can be found here:

[Hazardous Air Quality: The New Normal?](#)

### **Recommendations**

The NSW government should review current Work Health and Safety rules to reduce the risk to workers who are exposed to hazardous air quality resulting from bushfire smoke. The review should focus on developing a new set of obligations on employers when the AQI exceeds 150 that will reduce the short term and long-term health impact on workers.

Employers should regularly review PPE for use in hazardous air quality conditions to ensure they provide the most effective protection available to outdoor workers. Employers should provide training to workers on how to fit and wear PPE to maintain maximum efficacy.

Employers should establish a protocol of health assessments of workers exposed to hazardous air quality to: monitor lung function of affected workers over the short term and long term; identify respiratory conditions or diseases in affected workers; and refer workers diagnosed with reduced lung function or lung disease to physicians for treatment.