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The number of trained firefighters able to tackle blazes is 20,000 less than previously thought, with the shortfall raising concerns about the state's preparedness for major bushfire disasters.

The Rural Fire Service (RFS) previously reported a deployable volunteer firefighter workforce of at least 70,000, but new data published this week from the Productivity Commission showed just over 50,000 volunteer firefighters.

The same data showed the RFS is battling an ageing workforce, with just 20,600 volunteer firefighters below the age of 50 and almost 20,000 over 60.

In 2024 the NSW Fire Brigade Employees' Union (FBEU), which represents professional firefighters, warned that the public were unaware that their fire district could make the difference between a guaranteed response from Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW) and potentially no response from the RFS.

The distinction could leave communities in Rural Fire Districts, including several southwest Sydney suburbs, at risk.



A volunteer firefighter during efforts to contain a fire. Picture: Torrens Creek Rural Fire Brigade



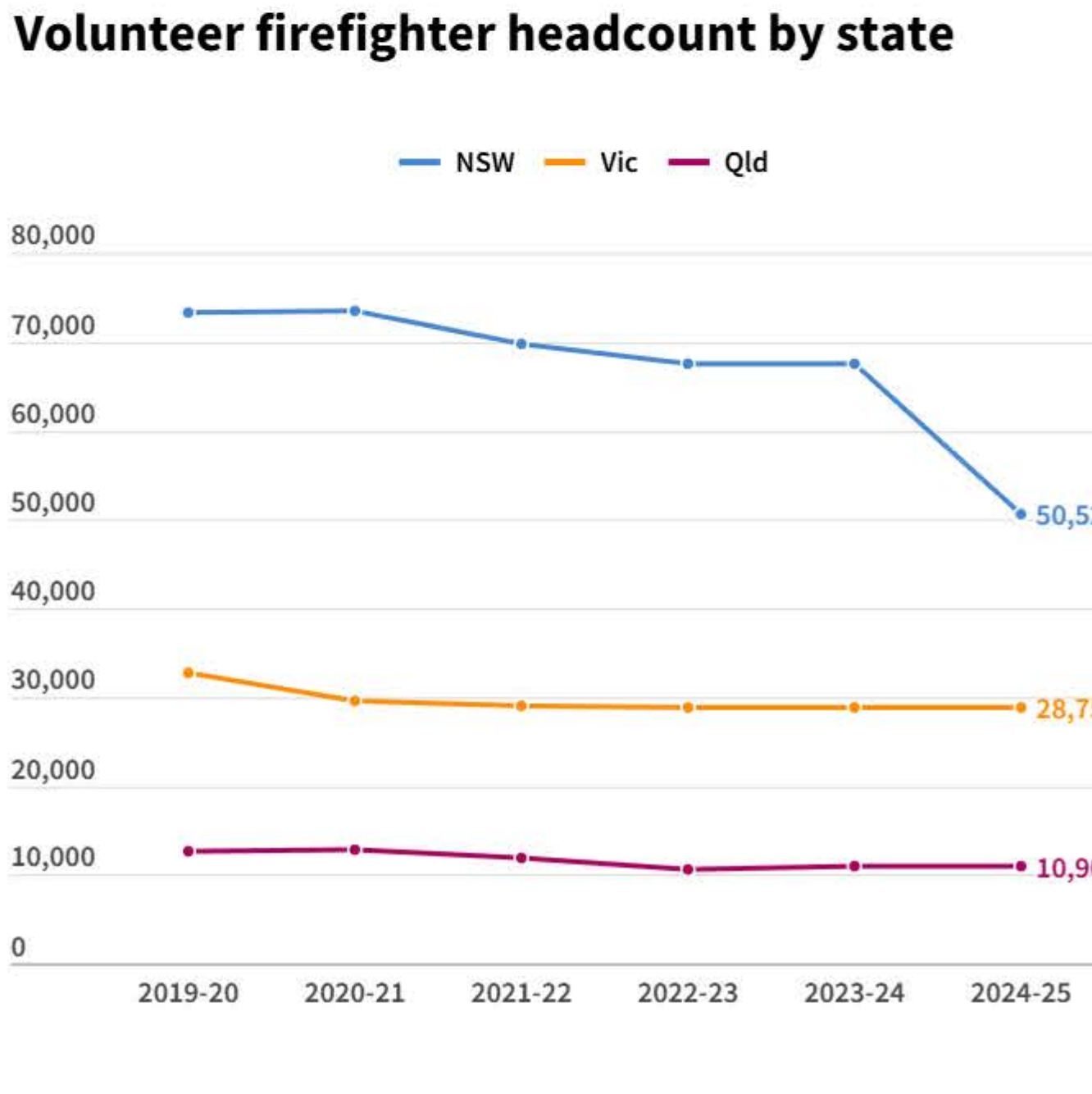
Glengarry Volunteer Fire Brigade personnel conducting firefighting operations. Picture: Supplied

A NSW government inquiry in 2024 found several RFS volunteers were deeply concerned about falsehoods surrounding true firefighter numbers.

Speaking at the hearing on RFS funding, Jindabyne Bush Fire Brigade Captain Colin Wooden said: "We have significant concerns that the number of active volunteers is well below an adequate number and certainly a fraction of the often-quoted 70,000.

"We know from experience that the RFS struggles to fill shifts and we don't believe having to rely on volunteers in their 60s, 70s and 80s to work 15-hour shifts to cover for the lack of resources is appropriate and safe," he warned.

The 20,000 shortfall in volunteer firefighters raises broader concerns about fire service coverage, given the growing risks linked to bushfires becoming more frequent and severe.



Source: The Productivity Commission

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Scrutiny over the number of trained RFS firefighters has persisted for several years, with recent NSW Budget Estimates showing about 45,000 trained fire service volunteers, 25,000 less than the RFS figure.

Documents seen by The Daily Telegraph from as far back as March 2023 show the number of RFS members with bush firefighter training was 50,716, while the number with village firefighter competency was just 16,240.

The relatively low numbers of RFS volunteers trained in core skills comes despite the service having coverage over more urban areas due to development.

During the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires, the highest number of volunteers mobilised on a single day was just 3739, out of the 70,000 on the RFS books.



Firefighters Jasper Croft and Ervin Blancaflor at Wyoming on The Central Coast. Picture: Richard Dobson

FBEU State Secretary Leighton Drury said the union had "serious concerns about the misreporting" of trained RFS volunteer numbers.

"Recent natural disasters have shown just how dramatically the emergency response landscape has changed," he said.

Drury called for a "whole-of-sector review" to address issues around funding, agency boundaries and duplication across emergency services.



Craig Burley (centre front), plus long-serving RFS volunteers Peter Gatt, Chris Petrikas and Bruce Earle. Picture: Rohan Kelly

An RFS spokesman told The Daily Telegraph: "As of 31 December 2025, the RFS has 68,890 registered members. Of these members, 55,059 are deemed operational by brigades and units across the state.

"As we have seen there have been sufficient RFS Volunteers out in force during the summer, including members assisting in Victoria and South Australia during a very busy summer fire season."

Opposition emergency services spokeswoman Tanya Thompson said: "The Minns Labor government has continued to neglect the RFS, failing to address concerns on volunteer numbers and slashing operational funding by 15 per cent and capital expenditure by 22 per cent in the last budget alone.

"Without accurate volunteer data and resourcing the Minns Labor government risks the state's emergency preparedness and puts our volunteers at risk."

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