

Revealed: Why NSW faces extreme bushfire danger with fewer firefighters

Ben Cubby, Angus Dalton and Michael McGowan

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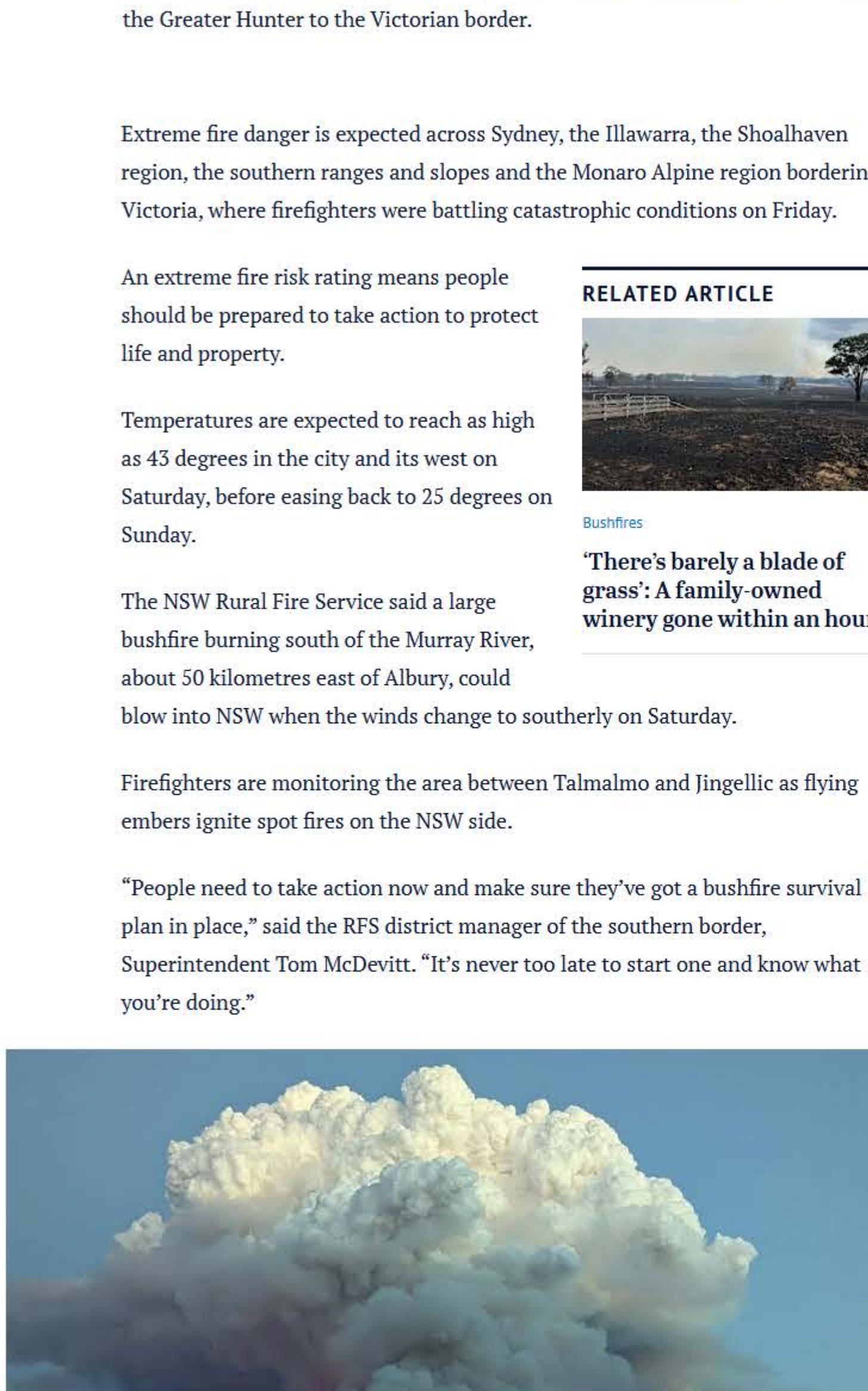
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NSW is facing a weekend of extreme bushfire danger with far fewer trained firefighters than previously thought, new data from the Rural Fire Service reveals.

The RFS has frequently said it is the largest volunteer firefighting service in the world, with more than 70,000 members, but the number of trained firefighters is now just over 45,000, the agency privately told the Productivity Commission last year.

About 16,240 RFS volunteers have "village firefighter competency", meaning they can fight fires in small buildings, in vehicles or other blazes likely to be found in a village setting, according to RFS documents from 2023 obtained under freedom-of-information laws.

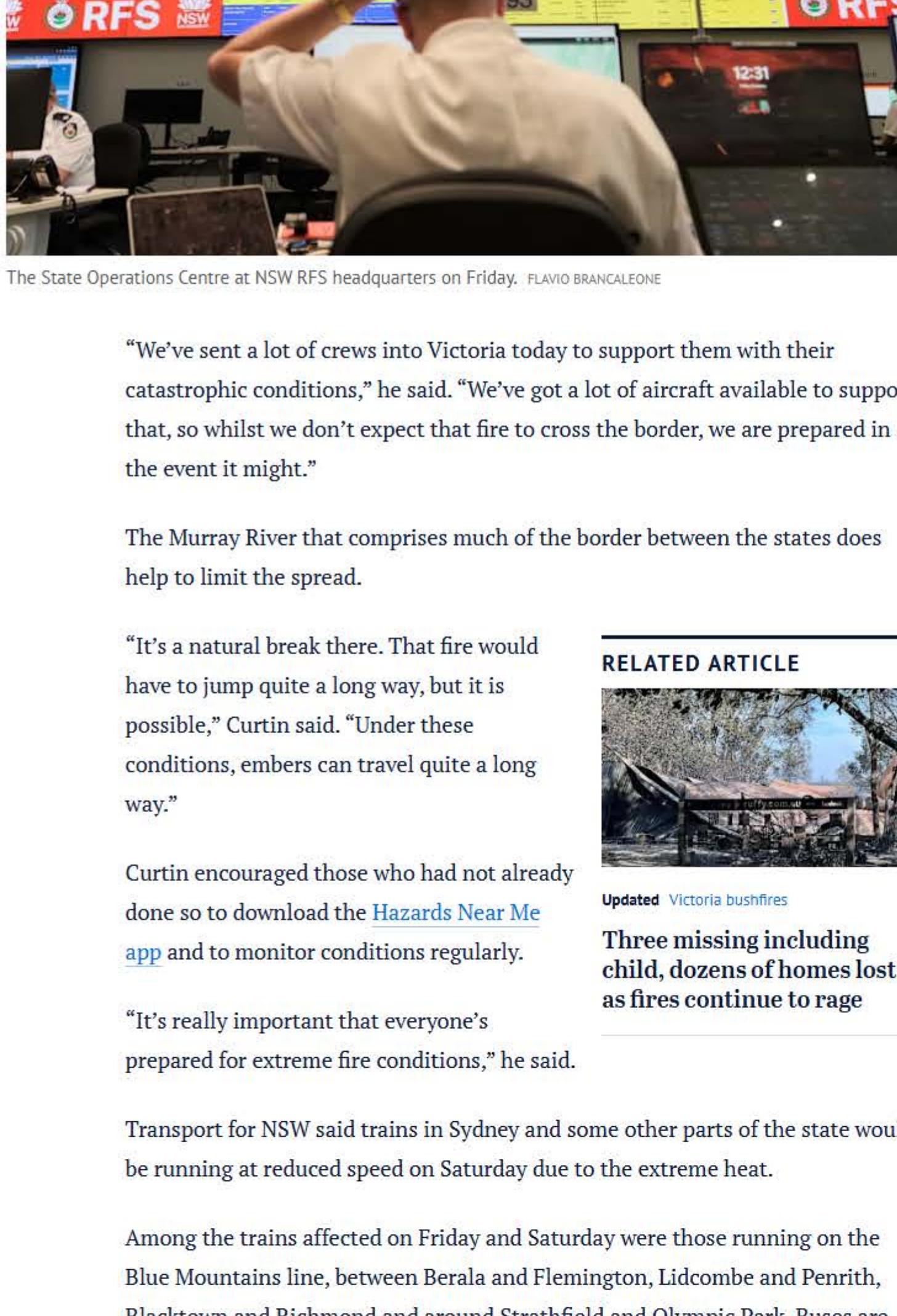


The State Operations Centre at NSW RFS headquarters at Olympic Park on Friday. FLAVIO BRANCALONE

Only 4550 people had training as breathing apparatus operators, the RFS documents say.

"Like many other volunteer-based organisations, there has been a reduction in membership for multiple reasons, including the COVID-19 pandemic and cost-of-living pressures," an RFS spokesman said in response to questions about the revelations.

"We've also seen demographic changes which have influenced the make-up of our brigades, including a shift from family-run to industry farms."



A NSW Rural Fire Service firefighter attempts to extinguish a bushfire at West Wallsend in December 2023.

But the service said it was "well prepared" to confront the heatwave expected to cover much of NSW on Saturday.

A total fire ban has been declared for much of eastern and southern NSW, from the Greater Hunter to the Victorian border.

Extreme fire danger is expected across Sydney, the Illawarra, the Shoalhaven region, the southern ranges and slopes and the Monaro Alpine region bordering Victoria, where firefighters were battling catastrophic conditions on Friday.

An extreme fire risk rating means people should be prepared to take action to protect life and property.

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Temperatures are expected to reach as high as 43 degrees in the city and its west on Saturday, before easing back to 25 degrees on Sunday.

The NSW Rural Fire Service said a large bushfire burning south of the Murray River, about 50 kilometres east of Albury, could

blow into NSW when the winds change to southerly on Saturday.

Firefighters are monitoring the area between Talmalmo and Jingellic as flying embers ignite spot fires on the NSW side.

"People need to take action now and make sure they've got a bushfire survival plan in place," said the RFS district manager of the southern border, Superintendent Tom McDevitt. "It's never too late to start one and know what you're doing."



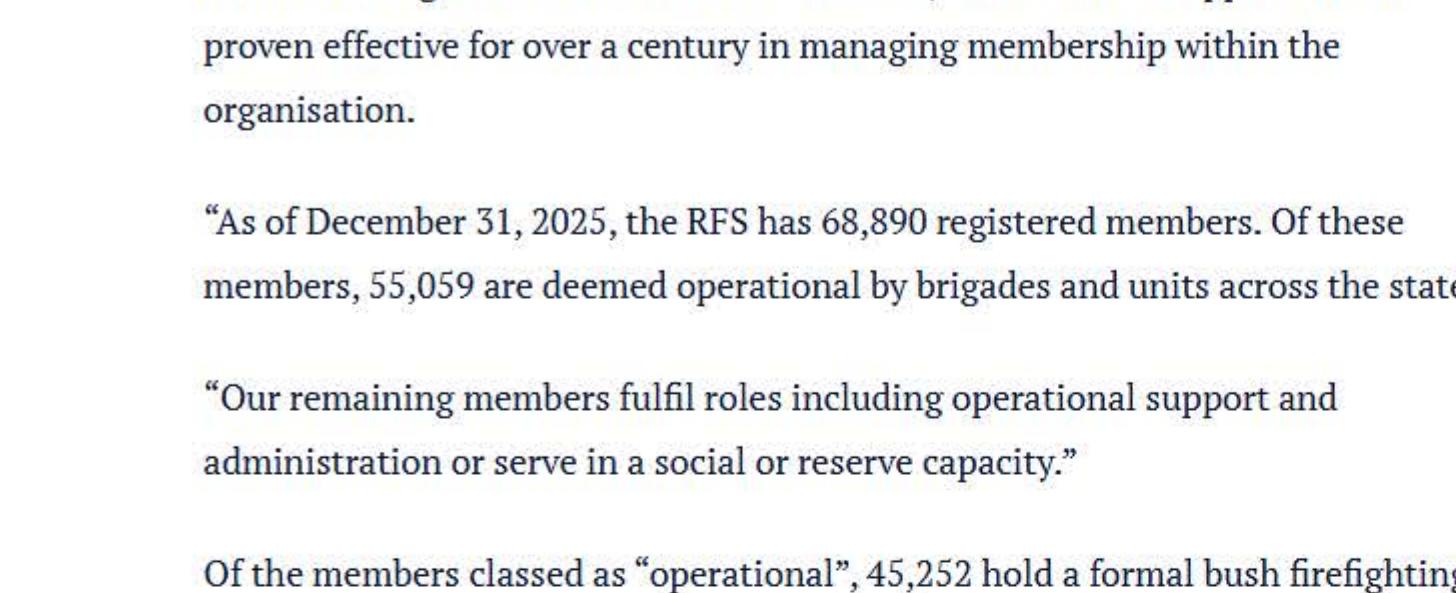
Smoke fills the sky above the Walwa bushfire, on the Victoria and NSW border. VICEMERGENCY

Fires already burning in Victoria and new blazes possibly sparked by dry lightning later on Friday will be fast-moving and hard to control as an evening change in wind brings 90km/h gusts to Melbourne, the Bureau of Meteorology said in an update from the national emergency centre.

The winds will then move into NSW on Saturday, increasing fire risk.

"We're expecting widespread extreme fire danger ratings across NSW and the ACT for tomorrow. No districts are currently at the catastrophic level," a BoM spokesman said.

NSW RFS Commissioner Trent Curtin said volunteers were helping south of the border.



The State Operations Centre at NSW RFS headquarters at Olympic Park on Friday. FLAVIO BRANCALONE

"We've sent a lot of crews into Victoria today to support them with their catastrophic conditions," he said. "We've got a lot of aircraft available to support that, so whilst we don't expect that fire to cross the border, we are prepared in the event it might."

The Murray River that comprises much of the border between the states does help to limit the spread.

"It's a natural break there. That fire would have to jump quite a long way, but it is possible," Curtin said. "Under these conditions, embers can travel quite a long way."

Curtin encouraged those who had not already done so to download the Hazards Near Me app and to monitor conditions regularly.

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"It's really important that everyone's prepared for extreme fire conditions," he said.

Transport for NSW said trains in Sydney and some other parts of the state would be running at reduced speed on Saturday due to the extreme heat.



Among the trains affected on Friday were those running on the Blue Mountains line between Berowra and Flemington, Lidcombe and Penrith, Blacktown and Richmond and around Strathfield, Olympic Park and Penrith, affecting tracks.

"Years ago, if there was a fire, bosses would let their people go and fight fires. Now they can't because of operational requirements and all that sort of stuff."

"So, now, the only people that are available seven days a week are the old ones under 65," he said.

In February 2025, the Productivity Commission's annual review on the state of emergency services across Australia found the RFS boasted a volunteer firefighting force of some 75,000.

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The figure had remained consistent across multiple reports, and meant that NSW had a higher ratio of volunteers per 100,000 people in the population than any other state.

"They all have their own rules of who's active and who's not ... I understand it's been applied in a lot of different ways," he said.

Rogers' comments prompted the Productivity Commission to seek further information about the actual size of the RFS force.

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

"Our remaining members fulfil roles including operational support and administration or serve in a social or reserve capacity."

"Of the members classed as 'operational', 45,252 hold a formal bush firefighting qualification."

"Volunteering with the RFS looks different for everyone, and our members engage in ways that suit their skills, availability and personal circumstances," the spokesman said.

"Communities across NSW have the combined efforts of volunteers giving what they can, when they can."

During the 2019-20 Black Summer fire season, there were more than 180,000 shifts completed by RFS members, but the most firefighters deployed on a single day was 37,39, according to a fire season overview produced by the RFS.

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