

Nerve centre at heart of Australian fires

January 13 2013, by Madeleine Coorey



The state operations centre at the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (RFS) is pictured in Sydney on January 11, 2013. Already equipped with the world's largest firefighting service, the RFS deploys information as a key resource in battling the elements.

As dozens of unpredictable bushfires break out in Australia's extreme heat, military-style operations are in full swing at a "nerve centre" that harnesses state-of-the-art technology allied to the power of social media.

Already equipped with the world's largest firefighting service, with more than 70,000 unpaid volunteers at its disposal, the [New South Wales Rural Fire Service](#) (RFS) deploys information as a key resource in

battling the elements.

At the state operations room at the western Sydney headquarters of the RFS, fire officials sit alongside representatives from the police, the Department of Defence, utilities and state bodies to coordinate the fire response.

Before them is a giant digital video wall, the largest in the [southern hemisphere](#), displaying information about all fires burning in the state, including maps, number of firefighters at the front and [weather forecasts](#)

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"This is the nerve centre for all the fires that are going on in New South Wales at the moment," media spokeswoman Brydie O'Connor told AFP.

All information—including fire behaviour analysis, air resources, number of fire trucks available, streets and homes that might come under threat—is plugged into an online system and is immediately available to all who need it.

The centre itself is disaster-proofed, with custom designs ensuring "if there is a major power outage or some sort of catastrophic event in NSW that electricity would still run in this building", O'Connor said.

Combined with the expert analysis and information to track fires, the RFS uses social media to engage with those who need it most: people in the path of danger.

Using its website, a new smartphone app and social media sites, the RFS works on multiple fronts to get the message out, alerting citizens to the nearest blazes and providing timely updates.

"[Social media](#) is proving a really effective way to get the message out to

the community," explained O'Connor.

"On Tuesday (when temperatures in Sydney hit 42 degrees Celsius or 108 F, and the fire rating in the state was catastrophic) we saw more than 80,000 people using our 'Fires Near Me' iPhone app per hour. That is a huge number.

"And with our New South Wales Rural Fire Service website where we publish our major fire updates... we saw a million people on that website on Tuesday and given the population of New [South Wales](#) (7.3 million) it's a staggering number."

The "Fires Near Me" app is designed to alert people to bush fire activity in real time, informing them of any bushfire within a 50 kilometre radius of their phone's GPS location and providing data on its size and severity.

At RFS headquarters, where the operations room runs around the clock while bushfires are burning, a team constantly updates the service's Facebook page, Twitter feeds and website.

At the same time, they are taking information from the public.

O'Connor said as the state sweltered under a summer scorcher last week, with more than 150 fires burning, one person was able to use Facebook to check whether his property had been affected.

The man, who was away from home, had heard there was a bushfire near his house and posted a message on Facebook to ask about it. A neighbour assured him the house was still standing.

Wildfires are a common feature of arid Australia's summers, with more than 100 homes razed in the southern state of Tasmania this month and hundreds of blazes breaking out in the past week due to heatwave

conditions in several states.

The government's Climate Commission has warned that such extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and severity due to climate change, exacerbating the risk of fires.

The so-called Black Saturday firestorm in 2009 destroyed more than 2,000 homes and killed 173 people, in Australia's deadliest natural disaster of modern times.

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