

BLACK SUMMER DELAYS 'FUELLING BUSHFIRE RISKS'

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NSW Emergency Services Minister Jihad Dib says unacceptable delays to the implementation of recommendations from the independent inquiry into the Black Summer infernos has left the state dangerously unprepared to confront the looming bushfire season.

An independent expert inquiry set up in the aftermath of the catastrophic bushfires across the 2019-20 summer period delivered 76 recommendations in August 2020, with 37 of those including a further 109 sub-recommendations to be overseen by the now dismantled Resilience NSW.

Led by former chief scientist Mary O'Kane and former deputy police commissioner Dave Owens, the inquiry found underlying structural problems across emergency services undermined efforts to combat the hazardous fires that left 26 people dead and 2500 homes destroyed.

Analysis by The Australian of the inquiry's first progress report in the first quarter of 2021 compared to the most recent, in the third quarter of 2022, found 35 per cent of recommendations or sub-recommendations had seen target dates pushed back, with more than 20 per cent not completed.

Of the 148 recommendations, 8 per cent had been delayed past the point of the approaching bushfire season, considered by emergency services experts likely to be particularly dangerous given the forecast swing to a warmer, drier El Nino climate to follow three years of above-average rainfall.

Some uncompleted recommendations include rolling out mobile data terminals into fire fighting vehicles to improve delivery of incident information/intelligence to field commanders, pushed back from an initial implementation date of mid-2023 to a considerably later 2025.

Research into the most appropriate cabin protection for different frontline vehicles had not been completed by the middle of last year, with the Monash University-delivered preliminary expected by the end of 2022.

New Emergency Services Minister Mr Dib said he would use departmental briefings to see whether agency delivery of recommendations could be

expedited, as he warned that protracted La Nina events had regenerated the grass and bushland fuel load.

"No delays that have adverse impacts on community safety are acceptable to the government," he said. "Disaster readiness and resilience is a top priority of any government and that requires learning and actioning the lessons of the Black Summer bushfires.

"This wet season has accelerated the risk of grass fires (and) created more fuel for a future bushfire season, which means any delay to these recommendations does not put NSW in the best possible position to confront bushfires, or to save lives and property."

Agencies tasked with implementing the recommendations included the NSW Rural Fire Service, Resilience NSW (replaced by the NSW Reconstruction Authority), the Department of Planning and Environment and the NSW Telco Authority.

As of the last quarterly report, Resilience NSW said 85 of 148 recommendations had been completed, with 63 in progress.

The NSW Audit Office in early 2021 issued a report criticising the way five emergency response agencies - including NSW RFS, NSW State Emergency Services and Resilience NSW - had addressed accepted recommendations from 17 public inquiries over the past decade. In relation to concerns about agency accountability, the then Berejiklian government introduced legislation requiring updates on recommendations from the bushfire inquiry to be provided every three months.

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