



# Trish Doyle MP

## Member for Blue Mountains



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### New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly

#### Bushfires

**13 November 2019**

I pay tribute to the many thousands of professional and volunteer firefighters across this State who have been working almost constantly since September to contain significant bushfire emergencies, especially from the mid North Coast to the North Coast of New South Wales. They are supported and assisted by other emergency services workers who have swung in behind them in recent weeks to protect our community. Police, paramedics, and community volunteers have all provided invaluable support to our fireys and have made life easier for those who have lost homes and loved ones or who have been injured and displaced during these fires. All the members of this House acknowledge the people who have lost loved ones or who have lost their homes.

As a member of Parliament representing an area that recently faced its own bushfire catastrophe in 2013, I know that the recovery process for communities that have borne the brunt of a bushfire disaster is long, difficult and continuing. To that end I call upon the Premier and the Minister for Police and Emergency Services to avoid the mistakes of 2013 when the Government dithered and delayed its initial response to the Blue Mountains bushfires. A coordinated recovery effort is essential and will take time. It will take time for people's grief, anxiety, displacement and loss to be resolved. Long after the Metro Media has returned to metropolitan Sydney, long after the ministerial visits have ended, there will be hundreds of people in regional and rural towns across the State who are doing the hard work of bushfire disaster recovery.

I pay tribute to these people in anticipation of the efforts I know they will contribute in the coming months and years. In the meantime, however, it is important that this House commends our firefighters both within the NSW Rural Fire Service [RFS] and Fire and Rescue NSW. These are the heroes who are out on the fireground right now, alongside their colleagues from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife and the Forestry Corporation. They are battling the ongoing threat up and down the east coast of New South Wales. Often when we hear of bushfires we think of our valiant RFS volunteers but, of course, they are assisted by professional firefighters, both permanent and retained, from Fire and Rescue NSW. They are also assisted by professional full-time staff within the RFS who provide the essential coordination and leadership support that makes the volunteer effort possible.

It is a significant concern for volunteers across the State that the ranks of the professional staff within the RFS are so depleted. Recently I was approached by volunteers in the Blue Mountains, the North Coast and the Riverina who are all horrified by the recent restructure of the Rural Fire Service, which left some 175 positions within the ranks of professional staff vacant right at the beginning of the bushfire season. The vacancies included area commanders, fire behaviour specialists, fire mitigation experts and aviation supervisors. That restructure not only produced

vacancies but also resulted in a huge number of experienced and skilled individuals—people who have committed their lives to professional public service and public safety—restructured out of the Rural Fire Service. Their corporate knowledge was priceless but it has been pushed out of the organisation.

At the same time, our Fire and Rescue NSW crews, both retained and permanent, have had to face successive budget cuts and labour expense caps, which have pushed down their operational capacity across the State. The RFS covers 80 per cent of the bush while Fire and Rescue covers 80 per cent of the population. Often it is a Fire and Rescue firefighter who stands between a bushfire and people's homes. This Government has enforced a 1.2 per cent labour expense cap on our fireys, despite making promises every year that the cuts to public service agencies will not impact frontline services. The Government has exempted teachers, police and nurses from the labour expense cap but not our fireys. Is a firefighter not a frontline worker?

Over the last day or two the Government and its supporters have crowed up and down Macquarie Street and at press conferences at Rural Fire Service headquarters in Homebush that our emergency services have never had it so good. They deny the cuts. But in this year's budget papers the truth is there for all to see. Employee-related operating expenses within Fire and Rescue were cut by \$13.1 million, while other operating expenses were cut by \$10.25 million. After other revenue is added back into the budget and other accounting measures are taken into consideration, the overall position of Fire and Rescue NSW is a cut of \$20.5 million for 2018-2019.

Other operating expenses at the Rural Fire Service were also cut by \$17.4 million in the last budget and there is a funding shortfall of some \$49 million between expected costs, including that \$17.4 million cut, and expected revenues. Members opposite can call it what they want; it is a cut. That is all on top of the 175 vacant positions which hobbled the organisation in the lead-up to bushfire season. I raise these issues today because if not now, when? The Government dismissed these issues at budget estimates and in the media. Yesterday Government members stood up and said that the RFS has never had it so good.

**The ASSISTANT SPEAKER:** The member for Kiama will come to order.

**Ms TRISH DOYLE:** The Government has opened the door to criticism of its constant cuts to our frontline emergency services. Members opposite may want to shout down any attempt by the Opposition to hold them to account for their cuts but I will not be dissuaded.