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## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

A resident in a bushfire-affected area

**Submission type**

I am making a personal submission

**Consent to make submission public**

I would like this submission to remain anonymous

## Share your experience or tell your story

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**Your story**

Please see attached word document and image files for full submission.

Thanks.

**Terms of Reference (optional)**

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The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

## Supporting documents or images

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### Attach files

- Mt Wilson Backburn - Blue Mountains - Bushfire Inquiry Submission.pdf
  - 15-12-2019---MASTER-SAT-IMAGE-LANDSAT.jpg
  - 14TH-DEC-2019---OFFICIAL-RFS-FB-POST-WITH-EMERGENCY-ALERT-AND-ALL-CONFUSING-COMMENTS-ABOUT-FIRE-ACTIVITY--POSTED-AROUND-1619PM.jpg
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# The Mt Wilson Backburn, Blue Mountains

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the heartbreaking and sombre losses that the country has seen over the “Black Summer” fire season. Given the dire outcomes, it is important that we look towards ways we can learn and adapt from this unprecedented situation. Thank the incredible efforts of all the RFS members over the recent fire season. I know many of them personally and have seen some exemplary situations. I also saw many residents who went above and beyond to assist their community fighting the fires and recover.

The Mount Wilson Backburn was a large scale backburn operation that quickly turned into a major bushfire when it became out of control. Started by the NSW Rural Fire Service on 14th December 2019, the operation was part of a series of backburns aimed at stopping the Gospers Mountain fire from heading south into the Blue Mountains. It commenced around 10:00AM near the intersection of Mt Wilson Road and Bells Line of Road and within hours of lighting up, it roared out of control heading north east towards the Mt Wilson village. It jumped the crucial eastern containment line of Mt Wilson Road, igniting spot fires within the undefendable Bowen’s Creek catchment area. This key turning point meant that the fire had escaped into inaccessible bushland and was burning aggressively towards Mt Wilson and Bilpin areas. The Bowens Creek catchment area had not been burnt for 25 years and the rugged terrain meant there were little strategic options available to prevent the fire impacting Bilpin.

The following day the Mt Wilson Backburn went on to destroy up to 20 properties at Mt Wilson, Mt Tomah, Berambing & Bilpin. On the 21<sup>st</sup> December, the backburn delivered its most destructive day of the campaign. As a strong southerly swept through the fireground at around 6:00PM, it created chaotic scenes along the Bells Line of Road, destroying houses, sheds, iconic orchards, and cafes. Communities to the east at Bowen Mountain and Kurrajong Heights were lucky to escape with minimal impact. Further south along the Great Western Hwy the Mt Wilson Backburn loomed large and threatening for weeks with some close calls. Defensive work by the RFS and some favourable weather allowed these towns to be spared significant damage.

It is difficult to verify without any official reports, but there is evidence to suggest that the same backburn was responsible for the destruction of many homes in Bell, Dargan and Clarence.

The overall extent and damage caused by the Mount Wilson backburn has not been accounted for.

The RFS has not disclosed any details of the incident and continues to publicly attribute much of the destruction to the Gospers Mountain Fire or the Grose Valley Fire – both of which are officially listed as being caused naturally. By analysing social media, RFS radio transmissions and satellite imagery, it is estimated the out of control Mt Wilson Backburn burned around 40,000 – 50,000 hectares with around 30-40 homes (possibly 70-80 homes if Bell, Dargan and Clarence are confirmed). The scale and intensity are staggering, yet it is not broadly understood by the public that this out-of-control backburn caused so much damage in the Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury regions. As with any other accidental or deliberate ignitions of bushfires – especially fires that destroy homes, there must be a dedicated inquiry into this incident.

With fires predicted to intensifying and occur more frequently in coming decades, this situation is something the state will undoubtedly face again soon. At the very least we owe those who have been affected by the Mount Wilson Backburn (and other backburns) some transparency and to publicly acknowledge mistakes made by RFS Central Command. As a broader community we need to learn and apply lessons from this human made disaster and ensure that the right decision-making process is implemented in future firefighting strategies. The next time a large scale backburn is being contemplated during fire season, the public needs to be consulted and assured that all risks factors have been considered and that appropriate communication systems and planning is in place to ensure community safety. Ultimately as a state government agency the RFS is answerable to the NSW government. It is the NSW state government that must answer the questions raised by this enquiry and implement change & accountability.

## Specific Areas of Concern about the Mt Wilson Backburn

1. The backburn was too risky and dangerous. The following issues must be answered by RFS command:
  - a. Why did it go ahead when there was a high fire danger and adverse weather conditions forecast for the area on the day?
  - b. How was the RFS planning to contain the backburn if it became out of control?
  - c. Why was the operation not stopped when it looked likely that a total fire ban was to be declared for the following day (15<sup>th</sup> December)?
  - d. Why did the operation commence during the day instead of running in the cooler milder conditions of night-time?

- e. Given the high-risk conditions, why did the operation continue when the Gospers Mountain Fire threat was still 12-16km away and did not pose an immediate threat to Mt Wilson.
- f. Why did the backburn not commence earlier in the week when milder conditions were present in the region?
- g. Did RFS under resourcing and/or lack of volunteer availability determine the timing of the backburn operation?
- h. Local firefighters were opposed to the backburn because of the known risk and fire history in that area. Why was this local knowledge not appropriately considered by RFS command before proceeding?
- i. How did the RFS Command assess the risk given the conditions? And how can they justify the decision to proceed with the operation given how many significant risk factors were present? Was this within operational/procedural guidelines?
- j. Has the RFS or NSW Government investigated this incident? If so what were their findings?

In order to start regaining public confidence, the RFS command must publicise the risk assessment, decision making process and operations strategy for the Mt Wilson Backburn.

2. The backburn was a risky operation, but the public was not advised of the potential risk until after they were already under direct threat from the incident. It is the responsibility of the RFS to warn the public about fire threats, including fire threats that may arise from their own operations.
  - a. There were significant delays between the time RFS command were informed about the backburn becoming out of control to when the first Emergency Warning was issued.
  - b. During the delay in issuing an emergency warning, no advice level or watch and act level broadcasts were issued. The first warning jumped straight to Emergency Level with the advice being "Seek Shelter" as it was too late to evacuate by this point. This denied residents the opportunity to choose the safest course of action which is to evacuate.
3. The first Emergency Warning issued relating to the backburn on the 14<sup>th</sup> December contained multiple errors that increased public confusion about the fire threat. This confusion is evident in

the comments on the RFS Facebook post on the 14<sup>th</sup> December.

The error in the Emergency Warning were:

- a. The location of the fire threat was not published on the Fires Near Me Map despite the RFS Fire Control being supplied the precise coordinates of the fire. In fact the Fire Near Me Map appears to not have placed any fire activity relating to the Mt Wilson Backburn until after 8PM that night. This is around 10 hours after the fire was lit and 4 hours after the Emergency Warning was issued.
  - b. In the above warning, the fire threat was titled the “Gospers Mountain Fire” – this is grossly inaccurate as the Gospers Mountain Fire was coming from the opposite direction and still 12-16km away.
  - c. On Facebook, the post broadcasting the first Emergency Warning was changed on the RFS Facebook page around 40 minutes after it was first published. This edit changed a critical bit of information - the direction the fire threat was approaching from. It originally advised the fire was approaching from the South West (the correct location of the backburn) but was changed to state the fire threat coming from the North, which would appear to be moving against the wind direction at the time.
4. The Backburn location meant that the only evacuation route for Mt Wilson was blocked by the fire. The alternative evacuation route along Bowens Creek Road had fallen into disrepair years ago and funding had never been resolved to make it suitable for cars. Mt Wilson residents were not given an opportunity to evacuate.
  5. On the 15<sup>th</sup> December the following day, as the backburn was burning properties in Berambing at around 3:45PM, the Fires Near Me Map had still not been updated from the previous night. As people’s safety was under threat, the Fires Near Me Map still showed the fire location 5km further west from where it was actually located.

### Extra Points:

The Fires Near Me Map consistently misrepresented the area burnt by Mt Wilson Backburn as being burnt by the Gospers Mountain Fire. These fires did not actually connect until around a week after the Mt Wilson Backburn was lit. Furthermore, when the Grose Valley Fire was created by the RFS on the 20<sup>th</sup> December, they stated that it had spread out of the Gospers Mountain Fire. This is completely inaccurate. It spread from the Mt Wilson Backburn.

Unsurprisingly, media coverage of the fires along Bells Line of Road mostly mentioned the Gospers Mountain Fire and Grose Valley Fires. If the RFS command was serious about being open, honest, accountable, and interested in implementing real change, they would have provided more information and details about the Mt Wilson Backburn. Instead there has been misinformation and silence.

This lack of transparency makes it difficult for the public or the media to independently work out what fire has caused what damage and to what extent. The RFS is given extraordinary powers under the Rural Fires Act 1997 to make tactical decisions that often have significant destructive consequences to communities and the environment. During firefighting operations, they can hold a tight grip over what information is released publicly.

There appears to be widespread problems and inaccuracies with RFS public communications, and warning systems. How can this keep happening, given that Emergency Warnings and information are critical for public safety? Crews on the ground provide exact coordinates and updates every couple of hours during major operations – even more frequently in rapidly evolving fire scenarios. Why are these Situation Reports not being converted into fire updates by RFS command? The RFS might be under resourced, but if the situation is so bad that a map can't get updated to show where the actual fire threat is, how can this technology/system be relied upon for future emergency situations where lives are under threat?

## Working Class Aussie Heroes

The recent "Black Summer" fire season saw public regard for the RFS skyrocket to stratospheric levels. The perception of brave selfless volunteer heroes being led by an honourable, "straight-talking" commissioner is no doubt a well earned one. When this is portrayed against depictions of "absent" federal leaders who have missed the mark, it seems the RFS became the epitome of the Aussie working-class hero – just humble everyday people out there saving the community at their own sacrifice. You only have to start counting the neighbourhood RFS thankyou signs or read through the gushing tributes on social media or to see why politicians are lining up for photo ops with RFS members. It is the kind of publicity money cannot buy.

But what happens when this untouchable RFS hero image is threatened by suggestions of incompetence, recklessness, poor judgement and playing politics? It should not be surprising that

the NSW Government and RFS Command are not keen on talking about what happened in disastrous operations like the Mt Wilson Backburn.

The RFS has a combination of: **a)** seemingly unquestionable public support, **b)** the power to determine which house or world heritage forest is saved or burnt **c)** a significant ability to control information released to the public. This makes it important for checks and balances to be put in place to improve transparency and accountability over risky decisions. It is understandable in emergency situations difficult decisions are made with the best intentions. The world cannot be perfect. But when the stakes are so high, these decisions – good or bad – need to be reviewed to learn from what happens. This is particularly important in incidents like the Mt Wilson Backburn.

It is worth noting that the Mt Wilson Backburn was not undertaken in an urgent emergency situation – it appears that there was time to undertake a careful and considered decision and planning process. But this does not appear to have occurred. Or if it did it raises questions about competency in RFS leadership.

Finally, I would like to again thank all of the firefighters, emergency personnel and community members for their tireless and outstanding work over a long and difficult period. Thankyou.

Pointing fingers and assigning blame is not my intention. I wish to see change. And for that we need transparency and some truth about what has happened given the disastrous outcomes. Without this how can we expect to learn from our mistakes and implement meaningful change to establish a safer and more sustainable existence in the bush.

Thanks to the inquiry for providing this opportunity to have a say and give some feedback.



**GOSPERS MOUNTAIN FIREFRONT**

CAPTURED 16/12/2019

LANDSAT 8 SATELLITE. EARLY MORNING AM.

IMAGE ENHANCED TO SHOW LOCATIONS

MOUNTAIN LAGOON

12km

LITHGOW

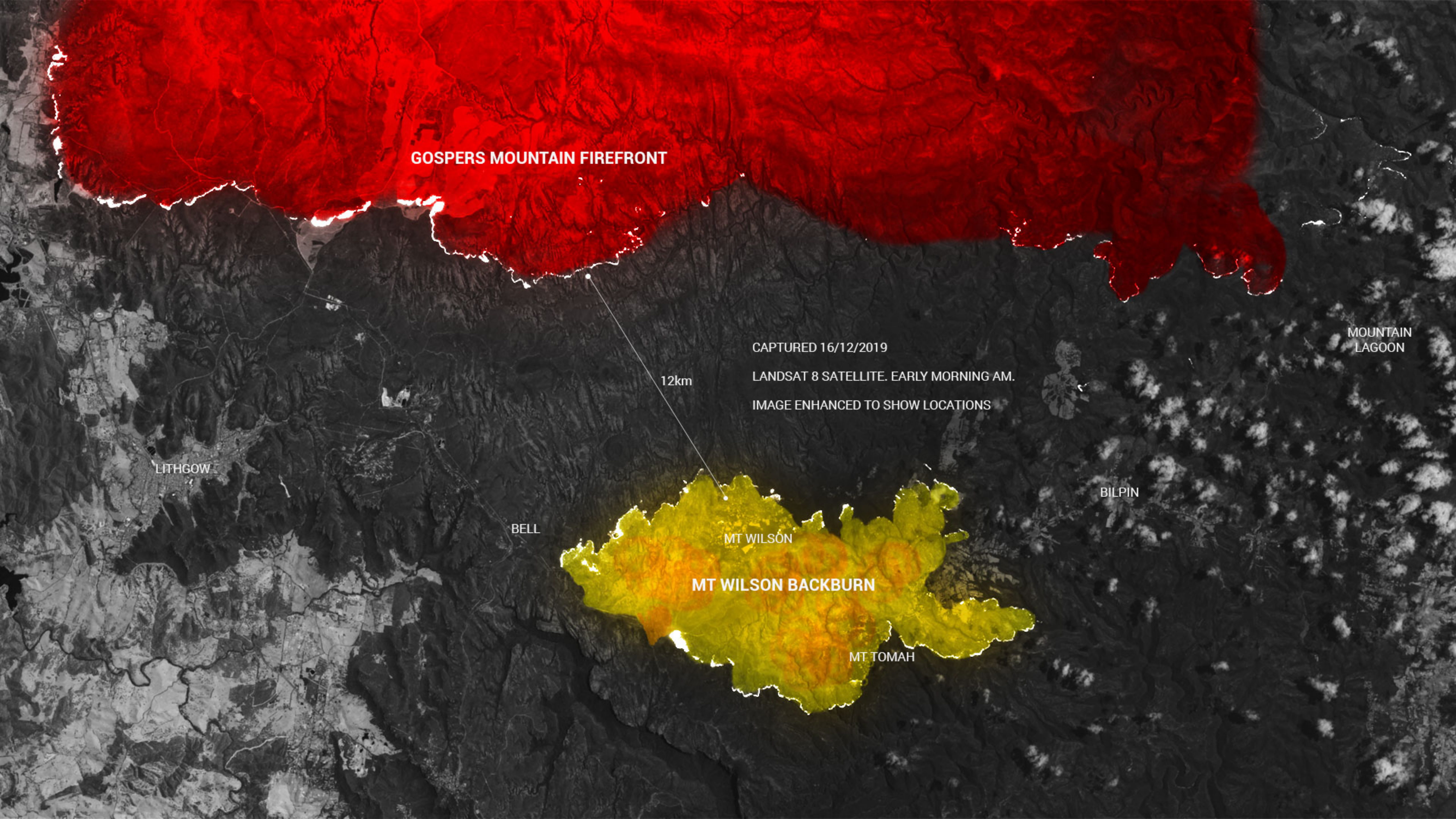
BILPIN

BELL

MT WILSON

**MT WILSON BACKBURN**

MT TOMAH







**EMERGENCY WARNING - Gospers Mountain (Lithgow and Hawkesbury LGA)**

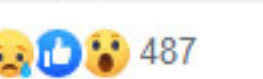
Fire activity is increasing. The fire is moving in a southerly direction towards Mt Wilson.

If you are in the area of Mt Wilson, it is too late to leave.

Seek shelter as the fire approaches. Protect yourself from the heat of the fire.

# EMERGENCY WARNING

**Gospers Mountain fire  
(Lithgow and Hawkesbury LGA)**



1800 NSW RFS  
18 00 0 7 3 1 1 1  
www.rfs.nsw.gov.au

👍👍👍 487

200 Comments 523 Shares

👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share

Most Relevant ▾

Write a comment... 😊 GIF 🗨️

**Lynn Michelle** Hope everyone finds shelter and stays safe. 👍 2

**Susan Morgan Ingram** Praying for all. Like · Reply · 19w

**Netti Jo** How the hell. Check BOM radar for wind direction. Heaps of sirens gone thru Richmond and plane gone up, but not sure where they are heading, sounded as if going in West direction. 👍 6

**Hazelle Dorne** Netti Jo Mt Wilson people cannot leave. 👍 3

**Netti Jo** Hazelle Dorne that's no good. More sirens have past. Must be heading there then. 😞 1

**Hazelle Dorne** Netti Jo I 🙏 no one hurt or homes lost. 👍 1

**Christie Minchenko** Atleast 20 trucks have gone up through north richmond up bells line. Like · Reply · 19w

**Hazelle Dorne** Christie Minchenko they need it. Like · Reply · 19w

Write a reply... 😊 GIF 🗨️

**Nathan Tyler** I know the warning says it's heading south to Mt Wilson but from the radio scanner it seems to have started impacting on the south end of Mt Wilson at Wynnes Rocks. Like · Reply · 19w

**Michelle Keygan** Vanessa Thomas did you know of the ArcGis.com fire map ^^ ? More detailed. Like · Reply · 19w

**Kathleen Foliaki** Too late to leave is scary. I hope you get better directional information. Like · Reply · 19w

**Jennifer Cruz-Tamayo** 😂 Like · Reply · 19w

**Clem Jet** Hours later the firesnearme map still doesn't show fire near Mt Wilson, yet it has been available to see here for hours: 👍 1

**Maureen Norrie** same and the one up at newness is saying it is no closer but very obviously is. Like · Reply · 19w

**John Dabroski** Clem Jet bloody hopeless, same with live traffic. Like · Reply · 19w · Edited

**Craig Bradford** Because they have the time to update apps aye. 👍 2

**Anneke Willems-d'Ancona** Clem Jet it is not saying fire at mount wilson, the fire is traveling to the direction of mount wilson! Like · Reply · 19w

Write a reply... 😊 GIF 🗨️

**Nathan Tyler** The burnoff along Bells Line of Rd appears to have gone rouge and hitting Mt Wilson from the south. 👍 3

**Jessy Rose** Shame they sent the big gun water plane to W.A... Stay safe everyone xx. 👍 1

**Laverne Saunders** How is Mt Wilson in a north easterly direction? That would mean it's moving in a south Westerly direction of the the fire? 👍 2

**Elouisa Dawn** Laverne Saunders that's exactly my query. That would mean Singleton, surely?? Not Mount Wilson! 👍 1

**Laverne Saunders** Elouisa Dawn they just corrected it! 👍 2

**Effie Kagaras** Bells Line of Road is a planned road closure - only way in and out of Mt Wilson. Like · Reply · 19w

Write a reply... 😊 GIF 🗨️

**Lynne Kearns** Can the map area of the GOSPERS MOUNTAIN FIRE be put back on the map. We can't see what is happening and where - Please!! 👍 13

⤴️ Hide 18 Replies

**TomTom Rothwell** <https://sentinel.ga.gov.au/#/> use this as an alternative while the other one is fixed. 👍 7

SENTINEL.GA.GOV.AU  
**Sentinel Hotspots**

**Tristram Haley** Lynne Kearns [https://firms.modaps.eosdis.nasa.gov/map/...](https://firms.modaps.eosdis.nasa.gov/map/) 👍 1

Quick View  
FIRMS.MODAPS.EOSDIS.NASA.GOV  
**FIRMS**

**Sami Groger** Lynne Kearns the map is likely being updated... Like · Reply · 19w

**Sami Groger** Its showing again. 👍 1

**Anabel Garcia-Olmos** Last update was at 4:39pm. Like · Reply · 19w

**Rhonda ODowd** Tristram Haley that's a great map system. 👍 1

**TomTom Rothwell** Also highly recommend this page they live stream the comms of firezones [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=2471509946407050&id=623574811372847](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2471509946407050&id=623574811372847) Like · Reply · 19w · Edited

**Christopher Harris** It disappears for 5 or so minutes whilst it updates its self. Like · Reply · 19w

**Sharon Byard** Very concerning the difference between Sentinel Hotspots and Fires Near Me re: the area around Mount Wilson right now. 😞 1

**Donna Edwards** TomTom Rothwell that page is full of what appear to be ONP voters that have ignorance as the badge on their chests. Like · Reply · 19w · Edited

**Hayley Linz** Sami Groger it was a tech glitch. Like · Reply · 19w