



Media Release: 18 January 2023

20 years on, the ACT's Emergency Services Agency still hasn't learned the lessons of 2003

As the ACT marks the 20th anniversary of the Canberra Bushfires on Wednesday, 18 January 2023, the United Firefighters Union – ACT Branch has called for an essential recasting of ACT's Emergency Services Agency (ESA) which has failed to learn the lessons from that tragedy.

United Firefighters Union – ACT Branch (UFU ACT) Secretary Greg McConville said that 20 years on, the ACT continued to be let down by the Emergency Services Agency (previously the Emergency Services Bureau), which was charged with keeping Canberrans safe.

"After the Canberra bushfires destroyed nearly 500 homes and took four lives, the ACT's Emergency Services Agency has still failed to learn the lessons of 2003.

"ACT Fire and Rescue remains short of equipment and trucks. The Acton Fire Station promised in 2021 to remain vacant block of land, and organisations set up to protect Canberrans from bushfires have been scrapped.

"Despite the near disastrous incidents of defective fire trucks during the 2003 Canberra Fires, the newest fire trucks procured for ACT Fire and Rescue suffer from the same faults of flammable plastic air intakes and unprotected brake lines, leaving firefighters and the community no better protected.

"We continue to be desperately short of firefighters. Between 2013 and mid-2016, no firefighters were recruited at all. In the 2018/19 financial year, only six were recruited.

"That's meant that firefighters continue to undertake unacceptable levels of overtime, and firefighters are being pressured into not taking their accrued leave to cover the gaps.

"Canberra latest recruit firefighters have also not been paid correctly since their graduation in December.

"Firefighters also have difficulty accessing training, with mandatory skills maintenance across 22 components of firefighter training having not been undertaken."

Mr McConville said that while the ESA failed to address these important issues with any level of competence, it had exponentially grown in staff and funding.

"Even as the ESA failed to address the priorities critical to protecting Canberran's safety, it has rapidly increased its own staffing and resources.

"In December 2021, the ACT Legislative Assembly amended the Emergency Services Act to expand the ESA's senior management with no consultation, completely blindsiding key stakeholders, including firefighters and their industrial representatives, the UFU.

"While \$45 million was allocated by the government to modernise ACT Fire and Rescue, the public, firefighters, and their representatives have no way of knowing whether this money is being spent as intended by the government.

"Thanks to the ESA's culture of secrecy and unaccountability, the operating revenue of the fire services remains cloaked by layers of bureaucracy which were identified as unacceptable by the Coroner and the McLeod report after the 2003 bushfires."

Mr McConville said that important bushfire consultative bodies created to strengthen the ACT's response and resilience to bushfires had been abolished without explanation.

"The Emergency Services Operational Review Group was established to bring together biannually representatives of all emergency services, staff and volunteers. However, without any announcement, it appears to have been abolished and has not been met since November 2020.

"The Bushfire Council was abolished in 2021 against the will of its members, including rural landholders and the Bush Fire Abatement Zone recommended by the McLeod report, and the Coronial inquest was also abolished.

"Unforgivably, the Coroner's inquiry into the 2019 fires remains incomplete and will not reconvene until April 2023.

"The community should not have to wait three years to receive answers about how it came to be that 37% of the ACT's land area was reduced to cinders.

In light of the ESA's ongoing failure to protect the community, its refusal to transparently disclose its budgetary decisions and its unwillingness to engage with critical stakeholders and the community, Mr Conville has called for a series of much-needed reforms.

"The Emergency Services Agency must be recast as an administrative and coordination body, as opposed to an operational service, as recommended following the 2003 fires.

"To deliver the budgetary transparency Canberrans deserve, we call for an inquiry by the Auditor General into the expenditure of the \$45 million allocated by the ACT Government for fire services modernisation and enhancement.

"Finally, we call for a restructuring of ACT Fire and Rescue Service as an enhanced fire and emergency services authority with its supporting professional, administrative, clerical, and technical staff.

"With climate change driving more extreme weather events each year, including worsening bushfires, the people of the ACT can no longer tolerate the failures of their Emergency Services Agency."

MEDIA CONTACT: Darren Rodrigo 0414 783 405

For a radio interview or comment, please contact Greg McConville on 0488 000 465.



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WHAT	On the 20 th Anniversary of the 2003 Canberra Fires the United Firefighters Union of Australia will call for an essential recasting of ACT's Emergency Services Agency which has failed to learn the lessons from that tragedy.
WHO	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greg McConville – United Firefighters Union Secretary
WHEN	<u>Today 11:30am</u> Wednesday 18 January, 2023
WHERE	Action Fire Station – land allocation site Corner of Clunies Ross Street and Parkes Way (Opposite Black Mountain), Acton, ACT.
MEDIA CONTACT	<u>ACT UFU Secretary Greg McConville is available for interview and comment on 0488 000 465</u> Media: Darren Rodrigo 0414 783 405