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- Documents
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filed: June 18, 2024 • Australia

CFA strike: Volunteers refuse to fight wind, solar and transmission line fires

Credit: Peter Hunt · June 18, 2024 · The Weekly Times · weeklytimesnow.com.au

Translate: *FROM* English | *TO* English

At least 24 CFA brigades are taking strike action, refusing to fight fires on land hosting high-voltage transmission lines, solar or wind farms, over what they call the Victorian Government’s “reckless renewables expansion”.

Most of the brigades are in communities that are being carved up by the 500kV Victoria-NSW Interconnector and subject to more wind and solar farm developments, as the Allan Government rushes to generate 95 per cent of the state’s electricity from renewable sources by 2035.

The volunteer firefighters have written to Emergency Services Minister Jaclyn Symes and CFA chief officer Jason Heffernan stating they would “restrict turn-out commitments to incidents at electricity generation and transmission infrastructure sites to ‘property perimeter defence,’” only entering the site if lives were at risk.

The brigades’ letter calls for “an immediate halt” of all current and proposed high voltage transmission lines and renewable energy infrastructure projects, and demands the government give “genuine consideration of concerns and acknowledgment of the negative impacts to our people and communities.

“Further action will be considered and taken as deemed necessary,” the letter stated.

Gre Gre Village CFA captain and St Arnaud deputy group officer Peter Knights said: “Our brigades are not prepared to defend renewables infrastructure that destroys our communities, carves up our land, reduces our productive capacity and divides people.”

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[Documents](#)
[Search](#)


CFA volunteers from various brigades at Gre Gre station. Picture: Zoe Phillips

Most of the 24 brigades backing the strike sit along 120kms of the proposed VNI West transmission line corridor, from north of Stawell and out past Charlton.

Traynors Lagoon CFA captain Jason Barratt said Victorians lived in one of the most fire-prone places on earth, yet the government was rushing to roll out renewables that increased the risk of fire in regional communities.

“CFA volunteers are becoming less and less, but they’re increasing the load on us,” Mr Barratt said.

Brigades say they have no hope of fighting wind-turbine fires and warn the CFA has issued contradictory standard operating procedures for the fireground when working near transmission lines that put their lives at risk from smoke-induced flashovers.

CFA brigades are already struggling to deal with fires sparked by isolated powerlines and transformers that go unnoticed for hours, to become firestorms that engulf the state, as happened on Ash Wednesday 1983, Black Saturday 2009 and the St Patrick’s Day fires of 2018.

The International Association for Fire Safety Science estimates wind turbines catch fire at a rate of 1 in 1710, with UK research engineers finding “the three elements of the fire triangle, fuel (oil and polymers in the turbine), oxygen (wind) and ignition (electric, mechanical and lighting) are present and confined to the small and closed compartment of the turbine.

“Moreover, once ignition occurs in a turbine, the chances of externally fighting the fire are very slim due to the height of the nacelle (turbine) and the often remote location of the wind farm.”

Energy Safe Victoria estimates there are about 2300 turbines in Victoria, with planning records showing another 311 under

[News](#)[Documents](#)[Search](#)

construction and hundreds more seeking Victorian Government approval.

The volunteer strike leaves hundreds of wind turbines without firefighter protection this summer and raises questions over CFA command's ability to draw on Fire Rescue Victoria for support, given its urban pumpers are incapable of fighting fires off road and without access to hydrants.

Mr Knight said he "can't imagine that book makers in insurance companies will think it's a good thing", so would cost them (renewable project developers) more.

As for fighting fires around transmission lines, Mr Knights said the CFA had issued standard operating procedures that were contradictory and dangerous to volunteers.

The CFA's SOPs advise brigades "not to directly attack fires in transmission line easement areas and crew members should maintain a safe working distance of at least 25 metres from lines or outside of easement areas, whichever is greater".

Mr Barratt said there were "too many grey areas in the SOP to make us feel safe", such as whether brigades should be 25m outside the easement and the role of fire behaviour during windy conditions.

Mr Knights said 25m was unacceptable and that brigades needed to be at least 100m from transmission lines during a fire, given the risk of smoke acting as a conductor and causing a flashover.

The CFA SOP states smoke from fires near or under transmission lines can create electrical arcs or flashovers that are "potentially life threatening to someone standing nearby", but gives no details under what conditions this can occur.

Meanwhile the Australian Energy Market Operator has established a subsidiary Transmission Company Victoria, which is in the midst of seeking Essential Services Commission approval for a transmission licence, which would give it the right to enter properties without landholder approval and compulsorily acquire easements.

Minister Symes' office said "there are no records of a transmission line ever starting a bushfire in Victoria".

"CFA brigades are made up of members of the community and their views may not always reflect the organisation's views.

"With more than 6,500 kilometres of transmission lines and existing wind and solar farms in Victoria, CFA volunteers have experience and procedures already in place to safely fight fires around this infrastructure."

Go to: [Firefighters Against Renewables Over Victoria](#)

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