



In the firing line

Will fire victims lose out in new scheme?

By **PENELOPE KILBY**



EARLIER this week NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell and Rural Fire Service (RFS) commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons declared a state of emergency with Mr O'Farrell saying fire crews were preparing for the worst but hoping for the best.

The past week's spate of extreme fire and weather has led to the destruction of hundreds of homes in what has been described as the worst fire event in NSW in more than 40 years.

Last week Mr O'Farrell spoke with Prime Minister Tony Abbott and assured all fire affected communities that everything was being done by the State and federal governments to get urgent help to people needing assistance.

The new restrictions, announced on Monday by Minister for Justice Michael Keenan, would mean residents cut off from their homes or workplaces as a direct result of the bushfires would not be eligible for compensation under the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payments (AGDRP), which is allocated by the Department of Human Services.

Those ineligible to make any claims under the AGDRP could fall under the criteria of a new scheme announced by Mr Keenan and the Minister for Human Services Marise Payne on Tuesday.

The new Disaster Recovery Allow-

ance (DRA) has been made available for eligible residents in the the Blue Mountains, Lake Macquarie, Lithgow, Muswellbrook, Port Macquarie-Hastings, Port Stephens, Wyong and Wingecarribee.

"These devastating bushfires have affected many individuals and have prevented people's ability to earn a living," Mr Keenan said.

He said the DRA was designed to help employees, primary producers and sole traders recover from the bushfires with financial assistance for income lost due to the fires.

"It is also designed to maintain the local workforce in the disaster affected area and support longer term local and regional economic and community recovery."

This is the first disaster event that the newly legislated payment has been provided for.

Ms Payne said the government encouraged individuals in these areas impacted by the fires to take advantage of this assistance.

Fire-affected residents may also be eligible for personal hardship and distress assistance, including a range of grants administered by the State government.

A spokesperson for the Attorney-General's department said in activating the AGDRP this week, the government's priority was to get early assistance to those who most needed it.

The spokesperson said the government was keeping the situation under review.

"As impacts become clearer, we will consider what broader recovery measures may be required.

"This is still an unfolding situation."

A Department of Human Services spokesperson said during the 2012 floods in Queensland, NSW and Victoria, about 70 per cent of phone claims for the AGDRP were finalised on the same day and the average time to finalise all claims was less than 36 hours.

However, the changes to the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP) have prompted backlash from the federal Coalition who have labelled the move as heartless.

Shadow Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus QC questioned the decision to restrict the AGDRP for victims of the NSW bushfires without explanation or consultation.

"Mr Keenan has heartlessly removed assistance for people who have been cut off from their homes for more than 24 hours, or been without water or electricity for 48 hours," Mr Dreyfus said.

"Now is not the time for the government to be reducing assistance for NSW residents who need it most.

"Australians who suffered the Tasmanian bushfires and tropical cyclone Oswald early last year were able to access the AGDRP in these circumstances.

"Mr Abbott needs to explain to NSW residents affected by these devastating bushfires why he believes they should receive less assistance than other Australians have received in bushfire emergencies."

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- Shadow Attorney-General
Mark Dreyfus QC

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Eligibility Criteria

Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payments of \$1000 per eligible adult and \$400 per eligible child will be made if you:

- are an Australian resident
 - are 16 years or older or are receiving a social security payment
 - have not already received an Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment for the bushfires
- And if you have experienced one or more of the following:
- you have been seriously injured
 - you are the immediate family member of an Australian killed as a direct result of the bushfires
 - your principal place of residence has

been destroyed or has sustained major damage

- you are the principal carer of a dependent child who has experienced any of the above

Current fire victims have until April 18 2014 to make a claim for the following Local Government Areas:

- Blue Mountains
- Lithgow
- Muswellbrook
- Port Macquarie – Hastings
- Port Stephens
- Wingecarribee
- Wyong

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