

Pollution concerns can be raised as WHS issue

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Unless all levels of government commit to urgent action to address this climate emergency, bushfire seasons are going to continue to become longer and more intense and the associated hazard of smoke is not going away any time soon.

Even in healthy people, exposure to bushfire smoke can cause headaches, irritation to the eyes, nose and throat and may penetrate deep into the lungs, affecting breathing.

The unprecedented scale of the bushfires and the associated smoke revealed a dearth of information from government and employers about the risks to workers from air pollution.

SafeWork NSW, the state's regulatory authority on health and safety, maintains a Code of Practice: Managing the Work Environment and Facilities. Despite being updated as recently as August 2019, it contains no mention of outdoor air quality, nor any guidelines for when workers should cease outdoor work.

The union movement has led the response to this summer's catastrophic events, not only providing direct support to affected workers but also in calling for government cuts to fire-fighting resources to be immediately reversed and for greater protection for workers in extreme weather conditions, including hazardous air pollution.

The ACTU quickly developed air pollution advice for workers with clear reference to work health and safety regulations and employer responsibilities. Unions NSW wrote to SafeWork NSW and the NSW Government earlier this month to call for the introduction of measures to ensure workers in NSW are safeguarded from poor air [quality\[A1\]](#).

Federation has worked with the Department to ensure that schools are provided support and advice to respond quickly and appropriately when the presence of bushfire smoke is of concern. Schools can minimise exposure by cancelling outdoor activities, keeping staff and students indoors for recess and lunch breaks and monitoring local air quality.

The latter is not a simple task when many localities do not have air monitoring systems. Furthermore, there are no clear guidelines to inform schools what levels of air pollution are considered so hazardous as to trigger the mitigating measures.

The ACTU's advice to workers goes further than the Department, recommending that where the air quality index exceeds 150 (very poor/unhealthy), steps to minimise exposure should be taken to locate work inside where the air is filtered. The ACTU does not recommend the use of masks because the fit and type of respirator requires expert advice.



Federation is aware that many schools do not have filtered air conditioning. Even in circumstances where staff and students have the option of staying indoors in filtered air, there are risks associated with extended periods without access to outdoor play.

Members with a diagnosed breathing condition are at particular risk and should consider whether the air quality is better at home or elsewhere than their workplace. Members who experience symptoms of exposure to bushfire smoke at work should contact the Department's Incident Report and Support Hotline on 1800 811 523.

Federation reminds members that, as in any issue relating to health and safety, consultation is not just desirable but a requirement. Members, through their Federation Workplace Committee, are encouraged to use the Department's Work Health and Safety Issue Resolution procedures to escalate issues such as hazardous bushfire smoke.

The Department has advised schools that in rare situations where there is a significant amount of bushfire smoke affecting the entire school and community, the principal should contact the Director of Educational Leadership and discuss possible alternative arrangements for staff and students.

Federation will continue to work with members in schools, colleagues across the union movement and the Department to ensure students and staff are provided with a safe school environment.

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