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January 27 2020 - 3:00AM

Combustible cladding on buildings threatened by bushfires



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Office buildings at the Brindabella Business Park that were threatened by bushfire on Thursday contain combustible cladding, but the owners of the complex say the risk is appropriately managed.



 Firefighters work on fire near Pialligo Road and Brindabella Park last week. Picture: Elesa Kurtz

Canberra Airport Group has confirmed there is combustible cladding in buildings across Brindabella Business Park, Majura Park and Fairbairn, as well as the airport terminal itself, but said last week's bushfires showed the measures and policies in place meant the buildings were safe.

The cladding attached to the buildings where thousands of people work and visit each day is commonly referred to as alucobond and consists of aluminium composite panels.

Canberra Airport chief executive Stephen Byron said there were comprehensive bushfire plans for the airport, which had been strengthened in recent weeks and months as the bushfire crisis gripped the country.

"Our team has been working on the heightened fire risk in the ACT and NSW really since about October, so we've been listening to the authorities and in particular working closely with the ACT ESA on the heightened fire risk, so much so we've been working hand in glove with them," Mr Byron said.

The airport management's efforts to be prepared for and manage bushfire risk had been redoubled since the horror fire day on New Year's Eve, Mr Byron said, acknowledging the risk fire could come from the west and north-west, from the north through Majura Valley and from the east into Fairbairn.

"There's a range of things whether it's fire breaks or on site equipment. Our guys are well set up, they've got their own firefighting equipment and tanks and the like and so we had well and truly factored in, a hundred per cent, that a bushfire could come into Canberra airport, into any of the precincts, be it Brindabella, Fairbairn, or Majura so we were ready for it."

Workers were told to shelter inside the buildings during Thursday's fire on the instruction of the Emergency Services Agency, and Mr Byron said the buildings had comprehensive fire suppression equipment and evacuation policies in case the buildings themselves had fire inside.

The risk posed by the cladding wasn't enough to consider removing it, Mr Byron said, highlighting that risks from combustible cladding are more of an issue for high-rise residential buildings rather than low-rise office buildings.

Mr Byron said last week's fires showed how well the airport's own fire crews worked with the ACT's emergency services agencies.

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Tenants in the Brindabella Business Park include the Department of Defence, Australian Federal Police, Australian Border Force, KPMG and many others.

Leaked documents show the Defence Department knew about the cladding in August last year, as part of an audit of its 30,000 buildings that found non-compliant cladding in five Defence-owned buildings. A spokeswoman for the Defence Department said the department had been proactive in identifying buildings with combustible cladding and working with building owners to assess whether external cladding was compliant.

"The use of aluminium composite panels as cladding does not necessarily mean that a building will be non-compliant in terms of its fire safety performance," the statement from Defence said.

"If a building is assessed as non-compliant, the lessor has an obligation to communicate this outcome to Defence as a tenant. Defence has been advised by lessors that the office buildings leased by Defence with aluminium composite cladding meet building fire safety performance requirements, and are not considered to present a risk to occupants."

The spokeswoman said ministers responsible for managing Defence's buildings were aware of the cladding and they had been included in the wider audit of government buildings.

"Australians deserve to feel safe - especially in their own homes and workplaces," he said.

"Did the federal government uphold its duty of care to the occupants, tenants and users of the dwellings in question to inform them about flammable cladding? They deserve to know if the federal government has their safety front of mind."

The five non-compliant buildings owned by Defence are not in the ACT and officials confirmed at Senate estimates last year personnel working in those buildings were aware of the cladding. While work to remove the cladding was starting, fire drills were practiced more frequently, as well as procedures to evacuate sooner in an emergency than in other buildings.

In December last year when the Currowan fire threatened Willinga Park on the South Coast, owned by Canberra Airport Group's chairman Terry Snow, the private firefighting effort used to save the property is also credited with contributing to the protection of the town of Bawley Point.

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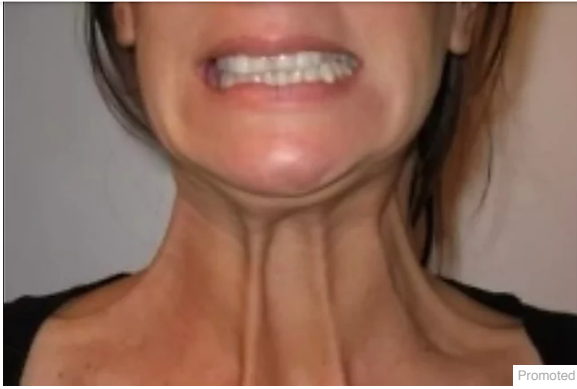


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