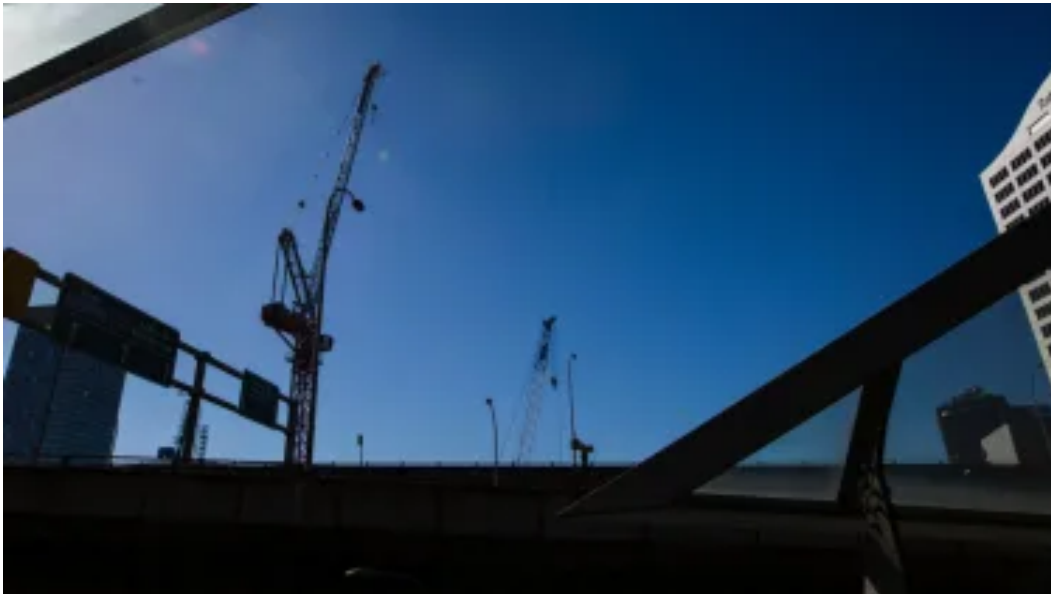


'We need more resources': Frontline firefighters diverted to cladding crisis

The state's fire brigade is dealing with a backlog of hundreds of safety reports as the agency grapples with Sydney's flammable cladding crisis and frontline firefighters are being diverted to the problem.

Hundreds of buildings throughout NSW are potentially covered in flammable material, though the state government has refused to release a list of those deemed at high risk, citing safety concerns.



Fire and Rescue NSW is dealing with a backlog of hundreds of safety reports amid the cladding crisis. DOMINIC LORRIMER

Fire and Rescue NSW has been used as part of a multi-agency response to the cladding crisis, but diverting its staff to resolve the issue has left a backlog of more than 700 safety reports, the firefighters' union said.

Fire Brigade Employees Union state secretary Leighton Drury said Fire and Rescue was under intense pressure.

"We need more resources and more firefighters," he said.

"It's not necessarily just about jobs and the trade union secretary being on about jobs, no surprises there, but there's some big safety issues coming that may not even be cladding but because everyone's doing the cladding, all the other work is not being done."

Asked about the backlog, a Fire and Rescue NSW spokesman said the organisation was now prioritising jobs based on risk.

"Fire and Rescue NSW prioritises tasks to be undertaken based on live risks, occupant and firefighter safety. It has allocated personnel to assess buildings with potential cladding," the spokesman said.

And when asked if the government had provided any additional support to Fire and Rescue NSW for the work it was undertaking, the spokesman said it was using personnel from within the organisation, who were sometimes being backed up by frontline firefighters.

Emergency Services Minister David Elliott referred the *Herald's* questions about the backlog to Fire and Rescue NSW.

Revelations of the extensive backlog come after the NSW Building Commissioner told a parliamentary inquiry into building standards that his recommendations on how to address the cladding crisis had been sitting with the government for more than two months.

Building commissioner David Chandler told an inquiry into the construction industry last week "it would be really good to get the proposal moving forward" when asked about the recommendations he'd made to government.

Mr Chandler wouldn't reveal whether his recommendations included a response similar to that of Victoria, which has announced a \$600 million package to fix buildings with combustible cladding.

Minister for Better Regulation Kevin Anderson has previously said his first priority was to make sure detailed and expert assessments were completed. Several buildings have already been rectified, according to his office.

Deputy opposition leader Yasmin Catley said Fire and Rescue NSW was being forced to "plug the holes" left by other government departments also tasked with responding to the cladding issue.

"We're now relying on an emergency service to do the compliance that Fair Trading NSW inspectors should be doing," Ms Catley said.

Mr Drury warned NSW was edging closer to a Grenfell Tower-style disaster.

"If you look at what happened at Grenfell a few years ago, you had a watering down or a self-regulation of the building industry. That's what we've got here," Mr Drury said.

The list of high-risk buildings was released to the NSW Legislative Council on October 31 after almost all non-government MPs voted for the government to turn it over.

It remains secret to the public. The government has cited arson and terror concerns as reasons to keep it privileged.

However, data from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) shows no increase in the number of arson offences in the Sydney Local Government Area in the two months after the locations of buildings at high risk from flammable cladding were publicised.

Greens MP David Shoebridge was given the information in early May through freedom of information.

There were two arson offences in May and five in June, down from eight across the same two months in 2018, according to BOCSAR, which classified the number of arson offences, which include damage to non-real estate forms of property, as "stable".

Mr Shoebridge says he will appeal against the government's move to keep the list private.

The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment advised councils in August that it opposed the release of data from the building register.

In an August letter, it says: "Information contained in the register may be considered a security risk such that there is an overriding public interest against ... disclosure of information."

The City of Sydney released its information to Mr Shoebridge in May, before the department's letter. The decision-maker found the "only public interest consideration against the disclosure" under the freedom of information act was that it might hurt property owners' financial interests.



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