

# Should Australia's volunteer firefighters receive payment?

## The issue at a glance

### What they said...

On December 29, 2019, the prime minister, Scott Morrison, announced that New South Wales volunteer firefighters who were self-employed or worked for small employers and who had been fighting fires for ten days or more would be eligible for up to \$6000 compensation. <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6559646/govt-agrees-to-nsw-volunteer-fire-y-payment/?cs=14231>

On December 24, 2019, the prime minister had announced that public servants holiday leave would be extended by four weeks or more to allow them to fight fires and he called on large employers to adopt the same practice with their workforces.

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2019/12/24/paid-volunteer-firefighters/>

These two actions only came after weeks of claims from the prime minister

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/10/scott-morrison-rejects-calls-for-more-help-saying-volunteer-firefighters-want-to-be-there> and others that such payments were not necessary and were not wanted by volunteer firefighters.

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/rfs-boss-rejects-calls-for-firefighters-to-be-compensated-20191224-p53mnz.html>

The issue remains a vexed one with there being no consensus as to whether Australia's volunteer firefighters should automatically receive financial compensation.

## Background

Australia's volunteer firefighting agencies

Throughout Australia there are many volunteer firefighting agencies which are set up by the individual states or territories.

New South Wales is serviced by two statutory firefighting authorities. These are the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (NSWRFS) and Fire and Rescue NSW. Fire and Rescue NSW has firefighting and rescue responsibilities for the major cities, metropolitan areas and several other towns in NSW. It also has the responsibility for all land-based HAZMAT incidents as well as inland waterway-based HAZMAT incidents. The NSWRFS is the volunteer firefighting service in NSW and consists of over 70,000 volunteers and has responsibility for over 90% of the land area in NSW. Although most of this is bush and grass land, the NSWRFS also serve smaller and regional communities that are not covered by Fire and Rescue NSW. Despite some overlapping in firefighting coverage/resources by both services, the NSWRFS does not provide rescue or HAZMAT services in the State.

Firefighting services [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer\\_fire\\_department#Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer_fire_department#Australia)

In Victoria, there are three main firefighting organisations, Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB), Country Fire Authority (CFA) and The Department of Environment, Water, Land, and Planning (DEWLP). The CFA is a volunteer and community-based fire and emergency services organisation that is made up of around 61,000 members. Of these members, some 59,000 are volunteers. Their roles range from fire, rescue, HAZMAT, to non-operational support roles. Firefighting services

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer\\_fire\\_department#Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer_fire_department#Australia)

In Western Australia, firefighting is organised by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) together with Local Councils. DFES operate the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service Brigades (VFRS) and some Bush Fire Service Brigades (BFS), while the remainder

of the Bush Fire Service Brigades are trained by DFES but operated and administrated by the Council of the associated area. VFRS Brigades are generally more involved in structural firefighting, Asset Protection and Road Crash Rescue depending on their location, whereas the BFS Brigades are generally more involved in Wildfire Fighting. In Western Australia there is an estimated 31,000 BFS Members among 585 Brigades, and 2,000 VFRS Members among 88 Brigades. Firefighting services

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer\\_fire\\_department#Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer_fire_department#Australia)

In South Australia, there are two legislated firefighting organisations. The South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (SAMFS) and the South Australian Country Fire Service (SACFS). The SACFS is staffed by approximately 13,500 volunteer fire fighters and around 120 paid employees. Firefighting services

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer\\_fire\\_department#Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer_fire_department#Australia)

Payment for volunteer firefighters

Though volunteer firefighters are entitled to compensation if they are injured while on the ground, they otherwise receive very little financial assistance.

Prior to the arrangements recently proposed by prime minister, Scott Morrison, some workers were eligible for up to five days of special leave from work every year to assist volunteer organisations, and that could be increased in a declared emergency. For longer periods of leave, it is entirely up to individual employers as to whether they grant time away from work, and how that is processed — as fully paid, time in lieu, partly paid or leave without pay.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-21/volunteer-firefighters-deserve-compensation/11820016>

Volunteer Firefighters Association President, Mick Holton, has noted that government agencies and larger companies were typically more able and willing to afford to lose staff for days at a time. Smaller businesses, he observed, often struggle to pay staff who were volunteering. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-21/volunteer-firefighters-deserve-compensation/11820016>

Some of the states provide a payroll tax exemption for wages paid to workers attending emergencies during rostered hours. However, many volunteers are not compensated for out-of-pocket expenses like fuel, food and equipment. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-21/volunteer-firefighters-deserve-compensation/11820016>

## Internet information

On December 31, 2019, The Canberra Times published an editorial titled ‘Scott Morrison right to hesitate over paying volunteer firefighters’

The editorial seeks to justify Morrison reluctance to make such payments.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6561180/morrison-right-to-hesitate-over-paying-volunteer-firefighters/>

On December 30, 2019, The Goondiwindi Argus published a comment by Emily Sweet titled ‘Voice of Real Australia: Volunteer help goes beyond state lines’ which criticises the current interim compensation scheme for volunteer firefighters for not having immediately been applied nationally.

The full text of the comment can be accessed at

<https://www.goondiwindiargus.com.au/story/6560678/volunteer-help-goes-beyond-state-lines/?cs=13316>

On December 29, 2019, The Canberra Times published a report titled ‘Govt agrees to NSW volunteer fire payment’. The report details the government’s decision to make up to \$6000

available to volunteer firefighters in New South Wales who had been fighting the current fires for more than ten days.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6559646/govt-agrees-to-nsw-volunteer-fire-payment/?cs=14231>

On December 29, 2019, The Brisbane Times published a report titled “‘An insult’: Queenslanders question volunteer firefighter payment scheme” which treats the concerns of the Queensland premier and others regarding the Australia-wide applicability of the firefighter compensation scheme announced for New South Wales’

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/queensland/an-insult-queenslanders-question-volunteer-firefighter-payment-scheme-20191229-p53nga.html>

On December 28, 2019, The Daily Telegraph published a comment by Sky News commentator Peta Credlin ‘Is paying volunteer firefighters worth the long-term price?’ in which she claims there are multiple disadvantages to paying volunteer firefighters.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/peta-credlin-is-paying-volunteer-fire-fighters-worth-the-ultimate-price/news-story/79a48bfb60ea64005aa22465ad6d44cc>

On December 25, 2019, The Guardian published a comment by the paper’s environment editor Adam Morton titled ‘Yes, Australia has always had bushfires: but 2019 is like nothing we’ve seen before’ which outlines the unprecedented nature of the current fires.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/25/factcheck-why-australias-monster-2019-bushfires-are-unprecedented>

On December 24, 2019, The New Daily published a report titled ‘PM backs down: More paid leave for some volunteer firefighters’ which presents the federal government’s decision to extend the leave of public servants who are volunteer firefighters.

The full text can be found at <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2019/12/24/paid-volunteer-firefighters/>

On December 24, 2019, The Sydney Morning Herald published a report titled ‘RFS boss rejects calls for firefighters to be compensated’ which outlined the objections of New South Wales Rural Fire Service commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons, to calls for his members to be compensated for their work in the ongoing bushfire crisis.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/rfs-boss-rejects-calls-for-firefighters-to-be-compensated-20191224-p53mnz.html>

On December 23, 2019, The Australian published a report titled ‘Pay would threaten volunteer “ethos” of RFS, NSW minister David Elliott warns’ which quoted the view of the New South Wales Minister for Emergency Services that paying volunteers would undermine the volunteer ethos.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/pay-threat-to-volunteer-ethos/news-story/239f5333ed52c4fd06a83605bd4dda62>

On December 23, 2019, The Sydney Morning Herald published a news report titled “‘Out of control’: Volunteer firefighters demand income support, equipment’ which details the comments of Mick Holton, the president of the Volunteer Fire Firefighters Association that more needs to be done by the federal government to support firefighters.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/out-of-control-volunteer-firefighters-demand-income-support-equipment-20191223-p53mhb.html>

On December 18, 2019, Independent Australia published a comment by Binoy Kampmark titled 'Morrison's bush fire problem' which is critical of the federal government's response to Australia's bushfire crisis.

The full text can be accessed at <https://independentaustralia.net/politics/politics-display/morrisons-bush-fire-problem,13420>

On December 13, 2019, The Courier published a report titled 'Heartfelt plea to Prime Minister Scott Morrison from Hunter firefighter's wife Amelia Attkins' which quoted at length from an open letter from a firefighter's wife calling on the prime minister Scott Morrison to give financial support to firefighters.

The full article, including the letter in full, can be accessed at <https://www.thecourier.com.au/story/6542114/heartfelt-plea-to-pm-from-firefighters-wife/>

On December 12, 2019, The Guardian published a report titled 'Fireys and fury: exhausted volunteers decry PM's claim they "want to be there"' which quotes firefighters claiming they need additional support and rejecting the prime minister Scott Morrison's claim that they 'want to be there'.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/12/firies-and-fury-exhausted-volunteers-decry-pms-claim-they-want-to-be-there>

On December 12, 2019, The Guardian published a report titled 'Volunteer firefighters in Australia warned not to crowdfund for equipment' which details an operational memo sent to brigade leaders by New South Wales Rural Fire Service deputy commissioner Rob Rogers advising against crowd funding for equipment.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/12/volunteer-firefighters-in-australia-warned-not-to-crowdfund-for-equipment>

On December 10, 2019, The Guardian published a report titled 'Scott Morrison rejects calls for more bushfire help, saying volunteer firefighters "want to be there"' which presented the then view of the prime minister Scott Morrison as to why the federal government did not need to make further provisions regarding bushfires.

The full text of this report can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/10/scott-morrison-rejects-calls-for-more-help-saying-volunteer-firefighters-want-to-be-there>

On December 7, 2019, The Sydney Morning Herald published a comment by the paper's political and international editor, Peter Hatcher, titled 'Fire? What fire? It's business as usual in Morrison's Canberra bubble'

The comment is critical of the government's response to Australia's bushfire emergency.

The full text of the opinion piece can be accessed at <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/fire-what-fire-it-s-business-as-usual-in-morrison-s-canberra-bubble-20191206-p53hom.html>

On November 21, 2019, SBS's The Feed published an analysis titled 'Why do Australia's bushfire defences rely on tens of thousands of volunteers?' which examines the historical origins of the volunteer fire services and the functions they currently perform. The full text can be accessed at <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/why-do-australia-s-bushfire-defences-rely-on-tens-of-thousands-of-volunteers>

On November 17, 2019, The Guardian published a comment an analysis by Amy Remeikis titled 'Australia's bushfire politics: the parties prevaricate while the country burns' which criticises the federal government's lack of action regarding the impending bushfire crisis. The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/17/australias-bushfire-politics-the-parties-prevaricate-while-the-country-burns>

## **Arguments in favour of paying volunteer firefighters**

1. Fires are now more extreme, extensive and are occurring for longer periods of time Those who argue that volunteer firefighters need to be compensated for their services point to the far greater demands that are now being placed on them. Where once they may have had to combat fires for a matter of days or weeks, they may now have to fight far more difficult blazes for much longer periods.

Across Australia there is evidence of a trend toward more extreme fire weather over the past 30 years, and of lengthening fire seasons. Fire agencies usually have a six-month break from bushfires between April and September, but in 2018 they had only three months' respite. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-17/drought-bushfire-seasons-starting-earlier-lasting-longer/10132570> Multiple studies, here and overseas, have found the climate crisis is extending the fire season. In the past, the season started in spring in New South Wales before moving south to Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania in the new year.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/25/factcheck-why-australias-monster-2019-bushfires-are-unprecedented> David Bowman, director of The Fire Centre at the University of Tasmania, has claimed the most striking thing about this fire season is the continent-scale nature of the threat. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/25/factcheck-why-australias-monster-2019-bushfires-are-unprecedented> By the end of December 2019 massive fires were burning in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria making it impossible for firefighters from one jurisdiction to assist those in another. In Queensland, by as early as November 23, 20 homes had been lost and about 180,000ha burned. In Victoria, where the bushfire season usually starts later, 100km/h winds fanned more than 60 blazes during an unprecedented heatwave. Seven districts in South Australia were rated as being at catastrophic risk of fire as temperatures soared into the 40s. A blaze on the Yorke peninsula burned through about 5,000ha, damaging at least 11 properties and injuring 33 people. Western Australia also experienced early bushfires in several regions, with fears of much worse to come over summer, and there were minor bushfires in Tasmania. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/22/australia-bushfires-factcheck-are-this-years-fires-unprecedented>

By December 25, 2019, the area burned across Australia this fire season had pushed beyond five million hectares, an area larger than many countries. The New South Wales Rural Fire Service has noted that the scale of what has burned in that state is unprecedented at this point of the fire season. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/25/factcheck-why-australias-monster-2019-bushfires-are-unprecedented>

Ross Bradstock, from the University of Wollongong's Centre for Environmental Risk Management of Bushfires, has pointed to the Gospers Mountain fire which has expanded to become almost certainly the largest single ignition-point forest fire recorded in Australia and,

for mid-latitude forests, possibly the world. Two months in, Bradstock noted, the Gospers Mountain fire is a monster, 'just unimaginably big' and nearly impossible to contain unless there is substantial rain. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/25/factcheck-why-australias-monster-2019-bushfires-are-unprecedented>

This problem is also being keenly felt in western United States, where fire agencies have warned that the fire season now lasts all year round. There is also clear evidence climate change is increasing fire activity in the United States; the record for the largest fire in California's history has been broken two years in a row. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-17/drought-bushfire-seasons-starting-earlier-lasting-longer/10132570> This has increased the problems facing Australian firefighters as the capacity for each nation to lend assistance to the other to combat fires is reduced when each is fighting major blazes at the same time. Australia's fire season is overlapping with that in California, making resource-sharing more difficult. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/25/factcheck-why-australias-monster-2019-bushfires-are-unprecedented>

2. Firefighting is cutting into the incomes of firefighters and limiting their capacity to continue

Those who support payments being made to men and women fighting fires for an extended period argue that without this these firefighters and their families will suffer great financial disadvantage and may not be able to continue with their work.

The leader of the Opposition, Anthony Albanese, has stated, 'If someone has not had an income for a period of months because they have been fighting fires, and we met someone in Bilpin who had been fighting fires since September every day, people who don't have an income for a period of three months, it is unsustainable.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/rfs-boss-rejects-calls-for-firefighters-to-be-compensated-20191224-p53mnz.html>

Mr Albanese further stated, 'There's no doubt that people, when they expect to volunteer, will do so for a day, a week, and many of these people for months. But ethos doesn't put food on the table. They don't pay your mortgage or your rent. The fact is that wherever I have been, this issue has been raised with me.' <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/government-faces-renewed-pressure-to-offer-payment-to-volunteer-firefighters>

Mr Albanese reiterated this point after visiting firefighters battling blazes in the Blue Mountains. He stated, 'I have...been very clear that people who are fighting fires, not for days or weeks but for months, still need to put food on the table for their families, still need to pay their rent and mortgages.

It is the least that can be expected that this should be looked at by the government and the government should act.' <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2019/12/24/paid-volunteer-firefighters/>

When the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, announced that the Commonwealth government would be extending its period of paid leave for those Commonwealth employees fighting fires to at least twenty working days and that it expected all large employers to do likewise, he acknowledged that such arrangements were necessary in order to ensure that those who were devoting long periods of time to firefighting could do so without having to worry about their own personal circumstances.

Mr Morrison stated, 'With bushfire seasons starting earlier, one of the things I've heard on the ground is that some people are dipping into their other leave entitlements to stay out there battling blazes.

Today's announcement is about ensuring our volunteer firefighters can keep focused on the job at hand.' <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2019/12/24/paid-volunteer-firefighters/>

The leader of the Opposition, Anthony Albanese, has also stressed that firefighters need some form of payment so that they are able to continue their vital work. Albanese has stated, "Firefighters deserve our praise, they deserve our thanks. But they also deserve a bit more too. They deserve for Government and for all of us, businesses are certainly kicking in, to do whatever we can to make sure that they can continue to do this." <https://www.msn.com/en-au/news/australia/should-volunteer-firefighters-get-paid/ar-BBYcJAu>

The importance of ensuring that firefighters did not suffer economically as a result of their commitment to fighting fires has been similarly stressed by the New South Wales premier Gladys Berejiklian. Ms Berejiklian stated, 'We want to ensure that nobody goes backwards and suffers unnecessary hardship because they are putting their life and property on hold to support others.' <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6559646/govt-agrees-to-nsw-volunteer-fire-payment/?cs=14231>

Though he is opposed to payment for volunteer firefighters, New South Wales Rural Fire Service Commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons, has similarly acknowledged that there are circumstances in which firefighters require compensation to avoid serious financial hardship. The Commissioner has stated, 'This will provide a security net to ensure that volunteers are not disadvantaged or going through loss of income as a result of their extraordinary and ongoing commitment.' <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6559646/govt-agrees-to-nsw-volunteer-fire-payment/?cs=14231>

### 3. Payments are necessary in order to ensure that all firefighters are treated equitably

It has been claimed that the present terms under which volunteer firefighters donate their services are not equitable. Currently state and federal government employees receive paid leave when they undertake voluntary firefighting work. It is also the case that many of those who work for large companies may also be given paid leave in order to fight fires.

It has been argued that it is unjust and unequal that those who are self-employed or who work for small businesses have not only to surrender their time and put their lives at risk in order to fight fires, they are also financially penalised in a way that other volunteers working beside them are not.

Victorian Nationals MP and Veterans' Affairs Minister, Darren Chester, has stated, 'We've got volunteers now taking a long time away from their workplace, whether they are small business people, whether they are farmers, whether they are employed in the towns... Expecting them to take away all those weeks and months to be on the fire grounds, side by side with state government employees who are being paid, I think in the longer term we need to have this conversation.' <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/government-faces-renewed-pressure-to-offer-payment-to-volunteer-firefighters>

The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, acknowledged this need for equal treatment of firefighters with different employment backgrounds when he followed up his initial statement that all Commonwealth employees engaged in firefighting would receive at least twenty days paid leave in order to allow them to conduct their firefighting activities with the subsequent announcement that those firefighters who were self-employed or were employed by small businesses that could not afford to give them the paid leave would be assisted by the Government. They would receive leave paid at the rate of \$300 a day once they had been firefighting for at least ten days and this would be paid up to a value of \$6000 per firefighter. Mr Morrison justified these payment arrangements with the claim, 'This announcement provides employees of small and medium sized businesses and self-employed volunteers with the same level of support [as those employed by the government or by large companies].' <https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/6559717/govt-agrees-to-payment-of-up-to-6000-for-volunteer-firefighters/>

Mr Morrison reiterated the importance of equity when addressing reporters at Rural Fire Service New South Wales headquarters in Sydney. He stated, ‘This basically equates to around 20 days of emergency services paid leave for self-employed people and for people working for small and medium-sized employers.’

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6559646/govt-agrees-to-nsw-volunteer-fire-payment/?cs=14231>

Sky News commentator Peta Credlin writing for The Daily Telegraph in an opinion piece published on December 28, 2019, has also acknowledged that the extension of paid leave to firefighters who are Commonwealth employees or work for big companies created a potential for inequality. Credlin stated, ‘The PM said he would ensure public servants got up to four weeks paid leave annually to fight fires. The banks, quick to grab the PR opportunity after a horror year of bad behaviour, have said the same too. And Woolworths, as well. Already, that now means some volunteers will be immune from loss of income while others, working for someone other than these big players, or self-employed, will not. The risk, of course, is that it ends up creating two classes of volunteer – those who can get by and those, who for every hour on the truck, means a potential hit to their ability to make ends meet.’

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/peta-credlin-is-paying-volunteer-fire-fighters-worth-the-ultimate-price/news-story/79a48bfb60ea64005aa22465ad6d44cc>

4. Firefighters need to be paid for the out-of-pocket expenses they incur while firefighting  
A particular area that has attracted public comment in the debate surrounding whether firefighters should be paid is the question of their out-of-pocket expenses. It has been noted that when firefighters incur expenses related to firefighting including fuel expenses, food expenses or equipment expenses they generally meet these costs themselves. Because they are unpaid, there is no provision for them to claim such expenses as a tax deduction and, as volunteers, they do not receive any sort of cash recompense.

The injustice of this situation has been noted by Sky News commentator Peta Credlin writing for The Daily Telegraph in an opinion piece published on December 28, 2019. Credlin observed, ‘Right now, the government has the ability to make special arrangements – like one-off payments or tax-breaks for volunteers (because let’s not forget, because they are not paid, the current tax rules don’t let volunteers claim any out-of-pocket costs for equipment or fuel). These are the sort of things that should be explored at a special meeting of state and federal leaders and emergency chiefs, so that we add sensibly to what we do, in our land of “droughts and flooding rains”...’ <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/peta-credlin-is-paying-volunteer-fire-fighters-worth-the-ultimate-price/news-story/79a48bfb60ea64005aa22465ad6d44cc>

The issue of out-of-pocket expenses has been raised repeatedly by Mick Holton, the president of the Volunteer Fire Firefighters Association. Holton has asked, ‘Why aren’t we picking up the tab for legitimate expenses like we do for paid people?’

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/rfs-boss-rejects-calls-for-firefighters-to-be-compensated-20191224-p53mnz.html>

Explaining further, Holton has claimed that volunteers had spent hundreds of dollars on fuel driving to and from strike teams up to three hours away.

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/out-of-control-volunteer-firefighters-demand-income-support-equipment-20191223-p53mhb.html>

One New South Wales Rural Fire Service volunteer has stated that standard issue equipment was often the ‘bare minimum’. He further claimed. ‘It meets the basic standards but it’s not the best. I’ve spent nearly \$2,000 alone on upgrading my PPE to a higher standard – helmets, better goggles, things like equipment pouches, head-mounted torches, which aren’t standard issue or where the standard issue is the most basic.’ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia->

news/2019/dec/12/volunteer-firefighters-in-australia-warned-not-to-crowdfund-for-equipment

The question of supplying personal equipment such as face masks is particularly vexed. Mr Holton has said that volunteers had resorted to crowd funding to pay for smoke masks. He maintains that the cost of such necessary equipment should be met by the government. He has estimated that purchasing the \$350 masks for an estimated 6000 volunteers would cost taxpayers \$2.1 million which he believes is a small and necessary investment of public funds. He has criticised state and federal governments' failure to act in this area: 'Basically, they [the government and RFS] are saying keep chewing smoke and we will have a look at it after the fire season.' <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/out-of-control-volunteer-firefighters-demand-income-support-equipment-20191223-p53mhb.html>

Several firefighting crews across New South Wales have used crowdfunding to raise money for personal equipment. Copacabana on the New South Wales central coast and Ingleside in Sydney's north both started grassroots campaigns appealing for funds to buy more face masks. The treasurer of the Copacabana brigade wrote on Facebook that the crew were 'horrified' they have had to use RFS-issued P2-grade dust masks and had sought to raise money for what they believe to be the better P3 masks.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/12/volunteer-firefighters-in-australia-warned-not-to-crowdfund-for-equipment>

There has also been substantial criticism of firefighters having to pay for their own equipment on the social media. Some have called for government assistance for firefighters, others have called for public monetary donations and there have also been calls for large companies to donate the necessary equipment.

On December 19, 2019, Claire Connelly tweeted, 'Volunteer fires queuing up at Bunnings to get much needed gear, paid for out of their own pockets. I could cry.'

<https://tinyurl.com/w6psvnt>

Among the responses were several criticisms of state and federal governments. Wendy Collins responded on the same day, 'The Government saying firefighters are equipped is just blatant lies' and one day later another reply read, '@ScottMorrisonMP and @GladysB you need to be sacked...People who pay no tax get free franking credits. Unpaid volunteer Firefighters paying for their own equipment at Bunnings.'

<https://tinyurl.com/w6psvnt> Also, on December 20, 2019, Rob Tee tweeted, 'Why argue about who should donate more. It's a vital service, the state and federal governments should fund it properly. People are putting their lives on the line.'

<https://tinyurl.com/w6psvnt> As of December 31, 2019, Claire Connelly's original tweet had attracted nearly 1,000 retweets and over 2,500 likes. <https://tinyurl.com/w6psvnt>

##### 5. Payments are not intended to create a professional firefighting service

Many defenders of some form of payment for volunteer firefighters argue that this is not an ongoing arrangement intended to replace Australia's volunteer firefighter service with a professional one.

Those who have instituted the current payment of up to \$6000 for (currently) New South Wales and South Australian firefighters have indicated that this is not a permanent measure and is intended to assist firefighters in getting through the difficulties of the current situation. This point has been made by the prime minister, Scott Morrison, who has stated, 'Australia's system all around the country has always, and will always, depend on having a large volunteer force to deal with these issues. When people join these organisations, they do it to protect their community and do it out of a sense of great service.'

Morrison has indicated that current measures are an interim expedient only, claiming, 'The challenge is the duration of these fires during this season.'

I've heard some stories which would make folks out there just shake their heads, but now is not the time to go into it. Let's get through this first, and then let's sit down with all of the relevant people.' <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/out-of-control-volunteer-firefighters-demand-income-support-equipment-20191223-p53mhb.html>

Morrison has stressed that the capped recompense of \$6000 for New South Wales and South Australian firefighters during the 2019/2020 should not be seen as a permanent system of payment for supposedly 'volunteer' firefighters.

Morrison has stated, 'While I know RFS volunteers don't seek payment for their service, I don't want to see volunteers or their families unable to pay bills or struggle financially as a result of the selfless contribution they are making.'

This is not about paying volunteers. It is about sustaining our volunteer efforts by protecting them from financial loss.' <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

Morrison has further indicated, 'The volunteer effort is a big part of our natural disaster response and it is a big part of how Australia has always dealt with these issues.'

The prime minister has stressed his government's commitment to a volunteer fire force and claimed that there are no plans to professionalise its work. Morrison has stated, 'We are constantly looking at ways to better facilitate the volunteer effort, but to professionalise that at that scale is not a matter that has previously been accepted and it's not currently under consideration by the government.' <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/10/scott-morrison-rejects-calls-for-more-help-saying-volunteer-firefighters-want-to-be-therrrrt5>

## **Arguments against paying volunteer firefighters**

### **1. It is against the spirit of volunteerism**

Opponents of volunteer firefighters receiving any form of payment claim that this is contrary to the spirit of volunteerism that informs the work of these firefighters and would weaken their motivation and morale.

This view has been put by the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (RFS) commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons, who rejected the first calls for his members to be compensated for their work in the ongoing bushfire crisis, saying it would undermine the spirit of volunteerism vital to the RFS. Mr Fitzsimmons stated, 'Don't do the volunteers a disservice by suggesting that you're going to pay them, because then they're no longer volunteers... for goodness sake, let's not take away from the extraordinary spirit that is volunteerism that underpins all that is good in our society.' <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/rfs-boss-rejects-calls-for-firefighters-to-be-compensated-20191224-p53mhz.html>

New South Wales Emergency Services Minister, David Elliott, has also rejected the idea of payment as contrary to the spirit of volunteerism which drives the states Rural Fire Service. Mr Elliott stated, 'Anyone who is arguing we have to pay them doesn't understand the ethos of the volunteer in this country.' <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2019/12/24/paid-volunteer-firefighters/>

Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) chief officer, Steve Warrington, has similarly claimed, 'We are always keen to explore opportunities to manage and reduce potential financial burdens on our members. However, it is my view and that of the CFA board that paying volunteers in general terms is not in the spirit of volunteerism.' <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/nsw-volunteer-firefighters-to-be-paid/news-story/2d13a6761aaf62dd1a050dfe372d5339>

Sky News commentator Peta Credlin writing for The Daily Telegraph in an opinion piece published on December 28, 2019, praised this spirit of volunteerism which she believes

typifies Australians. She stated, 'When we see a problem, our inclination is to think of others and want to help, to roll up our sleeves and deal with it.

We're renowned the world over as a nation of volunteers. We take it as a commonplace thing that volunteers patrol our vast coastline to save lives, put out fires and patch up storm damage but overseas, that's not how it's done. And we're better for it as a country.'

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/peta-credlin-is-paying-volunteer-fire-fighters-worth-the-ultimate-price/news-story/79a48bfb60ea64005aa22465ad6d44cc>

Credlin has reservations about paying volunteer firefighters because she believes it will damage their motivation and the quality of their commitment. She stated, 'Paying volunteers will change what they do and how they do it, forever. It will also change who they are.

The person who fronts their local fire brigade to sign up with no other motive than community spirit is different than someone who sees it as second paid job. As a long-time volunteer firefighter said to me when I asked him about paying volunteers, "the one thing that knits all of us together – and we're from all walks of life, different occupations, ages and backgrounds – is our desire to get in and help."

Credlin elaborated, 'It's a common purpose and a level of selflessness that we disrupt at our peril. Of course, once volunteers are paid, we will never be able to not pay them. Once we pay one class of volunteers too – firefighters in this immediate debate – there will be calls for others undertaking similar life or death risk to also be remunerated; lifesavers and SES volunteers immediately come to mind. How long will it be before using a public beach in Australia then attracts a \$10 fee to cover the cost of lifesavers?'

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/peta-credlin-is-paying-volunteer-fire-fighters-worth-the-ultimate-price/news-story/79a48bfb60ea64005aa22465ad6d44cc>

Credlin concluded, 'As many of our volunteers make clear, it is the stuff we do for love that defines us, not the stuff for which we are paid.'

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/peta-credlin-is-paying-volunteer-fire-fighters-worth-the-ultimate-price/news-story/79a48bfb60ea64005aa22465ad6d44cc>

There has also been concern expressed that if firefighters ceased to be volunteers and were paid that the wrong type of applicant might be attracted.

Mick Holton, the president of the Volunteer Fire Firefighters Association has conceded there was concern compensation may attract the wrong types of volunteers.

Mr Holton has stated, 'Sometimes when we have major fires, we get people coming out of the woodwork. Many have skills and are worthwhile participants. Others may be not so.'

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

## 2. Volunteers do not want payment

Those who oppose financial compensation being paid to voluntary firefighters argue that it is not what those men and women performing this service want.

This view has been put by the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (RFS) commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons, who has stated, 'Overwhelmingly in my decades of service and even getting around some of these fire grounds in the last few days, the volunteers don't want payment. It doesn't make them volunteers. They have given me that message loud and clear, again and again.' <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/government-faces-renewed-pressure-to-offer-payment-to-volunteer-firefighters>

The same view has been put by Brian McDonough, the president of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service Association. McDonough has stated that the 'vast majority' of his state's firefighters do 'definitely not' want to be paid for their efforts. He has stated, 'It's a volunteer organisation and we volunteer. It's really a quite simple response.' McDonough

further stated, 'Ongoing payment for volunteers is definitely not a consideration.'  
<https://www.2gb.com/vast-majority-of-volunteer-firefighters-dont-want-to-be-paid/>  
New South Wales Emergency Services Minister, David Elliott, has also indicated that volunteer firefighters do not want payment.

Elliott has stated, 'Anyone who is arguing we have to pay them doesn't understand the ethos of the volunteer in this country.'  
<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2019/12/24/paid-volunteer-firefighters/>

A spokesperson for the New South Wales Rural Fire Service, Inspector Ben Shepherd, has stated, 'As a volunteer myself, the reason I did this was because I wanted to help my community, not for any financial gain.' Shepherd further noted that most volunteers would not want to be paid because it would detract from the reasons for which they take on fire fighting.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/12/firefighters-and-fury-exhausted-volunteers-decry-pms-claim-they-want-to-be-there>

The Victorian Police and Emergency Services Minister, Lisa Neville, has similarly noted that Victorian volunteer firefighters and their association have made it plain to her that they do not want payment.

Neville has stated, 'I have committed to work with volunteer agencies about is there anything in the Prime Minister's announcement [pledging payment to New South Wales firefighters] that would be available for Victoria, but they have made it absolutely clear to me they do not believe there should be payments to volunteers — that this is not their second job, it's something they contribute their time and their energy to ... and it's not about payment.'  
<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/nsw-volunteer-firefighters-to-be-paid/news-story/2d13a6761aaf62dd1a050dfe372d5339>

The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, has similarly noted that his interim measure intended to compensate New South Wales firefighters (and others subject to arrangements made with the other state governments) has not been in response to requests from volunteer firefighters that they be paid and is not intended to institute a system of payment.

Morrison has stated, 'I haven't had volunteer firefighters say they want to be paid. I do know ... particularly for self-employed people (that) this is really starting to bite and really having an impact.

We have carefully worked through how best to deal with the issue of income loss that has been suffered as a result of people -stepping up to defend their communities.'  
<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/nsw-volunteer-firefighters-to-be-paid/news-story/2d13a6761aaf62dd1a050dfe372d5339>

### 3. The new scheme has not been equitably rolled out across states

The current scheme of payment for firefighters put in place by the Morrison government for the 2019/20 fire season has been criticised as too narrowly focused on New South Wales. The Queensland Government has claimed that its firefighters were not considered during the development of the current scheme, while the Victorian government has also noted that it was not consulted as the scheme was being developed and that it will need to consider the ramifications of the federal government's proposal before deciding what position to take. The Queensland Minister for Police and Corrective Services, Mark Ryan, has argued that the federal scheme should cover the whole country. Ryan has stated, 'Quite frankly, I'm sick of this Prime Minister being a Prime Minister for New South Wales only. He doesn't seem to ever think about Queensland.

For him to come out and announce that he's only putting a scheme in place for New South Wales Rural Fire Service volunteers and not a national scheme, I think is an insult to all of those hardworking Queenslanders who are not only out and about fighting fires right now in Queensland, but have in the past and in very recent times helped their colleagues in New

South Wales.’ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

A similar point has been made by Queensland Fire and Emergency Services Minister, Craig Crawford, who has stated, ‘Suddenly, out of the blue...the Prime Minister comes out with this one, giving states very little time to actually analyse any detail before they [the government] come out and start hitting us, saying we’re not going to accept, which was completely incorrect.’ <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/queensland/premier-pens-letter-to-pm-after-fiery-showdown-over-pay-for-volunteers-20191230-p53nko.html>

Some Queensland firefighters have expressed concern that the arrangements that have been made for volunteers from New South Wales may not be applicable to those from Queensland. Queensland’s volunteer fire association has suggested that based on the New South Wales model, many Queensland firefighters would not be eligible for payment - including those who had travelled to help their interstate colleagues.

Rural Fire Brigades Association Queensland president, Ian Pike, has stated that payments can only be worked out equitably if a whole-country approach is adopted. Pike has claimed, ‘It’s something that’s got to be looked at on a national level.’

<https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/queensland/an-insult-queenslanders-question-volunteer-firefighter-payment-scheme-20191229-p53nga.html>

Volunteers from South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania have travelled to the Blue Mountains and north coast of New South Wales to assist local firefighters.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/29/volunteers-fighting-bushfires-all-states-eligible-compensation-scott-morrison-australia-fires>

Victoria has also complained about the lack of consultation. Victorian Emergency Services Minister, Lisa Neville, has stated, ‘We are still trying to get our head around what the actual announcement is.’ <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/queensland/an-insult-queenslanders-question-volunteer-firefighter-payment-scheme-20191229-p53nga.html>

The federal Opposition leader, Anthony Albanese, has criticised the incomplete nature of the arrangements currently in place to pay firefighters. Albanese has claimed that firefighters outside New South Wales need extra support now. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-29/scott-morrison-announces-volunteer-firefighter-compensation/11830758>

Albanese has stated, ‘One of the things I know from being on the ground on the north coast, in Queensland, on the South Coast, is that many firefighters are travelling from interstate. These fires don’t recognise State boundaries and nor do firefighters, I’ve got to say. That’s why it needs a national approach.’ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7835037/Shocking-reason-firefighters-not-6-000-Scott-Morrison-offered-them.html>

4. Paying volunteers does not guarantee businesses will be able to release them

There are those who have expressed concern that making payments available to volunteer firefighters will not address the problem as the businesses which employ them may not be able to afford to let them go.

Former Fire and Rescue New South Wales commissioner, Greg Mullins, has argued that there will come a time when Australian businesses will simply not be able to afford to release their employees to fight fires.

Mullins has stated, ‘As the bushfire season continues and volunteers keep requesting time off work their employers will start saying: “Hey we’ve got a business to run.”’

<https://7news.com.au/politics/scott-morrison/scott-morrison-rejects-paying-volunteer-firefighters-battling-unprecedented-blaze-says-they-want-to-be-out-there--c-598843>

The New South Wales Rural Fire Service Commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons, has stated that discussions were ongoing about ‘what other things can be done to support and incentivise employers and small business...’

<https://10daily.com.au/news/politics/a191223cmxnj/volunteer-firefighters-should-be-compensated-so-they-dont-fall-behind-on-bills-experts-say-20191223>

Mick Holton, the president of the Volunteer Fire Firefighters Association, has drawn attention to the problems faced by small business expected to support volunteer firefighters. Holton has indicated that he runs a small business of his own and has said he sympathised with some employers. He stated, 'It's not right for us to expect employers to foot the bill for firefighting. Some businesses do, and I take my hat off to them. If I had an employee duck out for a few hours to fight fires, I'd pay them of course, but I couldn't afford it day after day.'

<https://10daily.com.au/news/politics/a191223cmxnj/volunteer-firefighters-should-be-compensated-so-they-dont-fall-behind-on-bills-experts-say-20191223>

In a letter to the editor published in the Tasmanian Advocate on December 31, 2019, Phil McDonald argued that small businesses might not be able to afford to release volunteers and then pay for their often-untrained replacements. He stated, 'What about the people who work for small businesses in the town; businesses that can't afford to pay for extra staff as well. The owners are doing their best just keeping the doors open.'

<https://www.theadvocate.com.au/story/6560300/pm-sparks-strong-backlash-on-firies-pay/> Richard Olsen, New South Wales state secretary of the Transport Workers Union has stated, 'The TWU is aware that many companies are reluctant, resisting our claims for provisions in agreements that cover emergency leave [to fight fires].'

<https://www.smh.com.au/business/workplace/calls-to-compensate-bushfire-volunteers-for-time-off-work-20191220-p531st.html>

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive officer, James Pearson, has said there is no 'hard and fast rule' about whether employers or the government should cover the cost of employees taking time off to volunteer as firefighters.

Pearson further added, 'A number of businesses already cover financially for employees who volunteer as firefighters, however, some small businesses in these communities are already doing it tough and would be unable to afford it.'

<https://www.smh.com.au/business/workplace/calls-to-compensate-bushfire-volunteers-for-time-off-work-20191220-p531st.html>

There is no requirement that companies release employees to do volunteer firefighting and some may not find it financially feasible to do so.

## 5. Paying firefighters could lead to the end of the volunteer organisations upon which Australia depends

Opponents of making payments to volunteer firefighters have argued that this is the thin end of a wedge that could see the dismantlement of Australia's extensive network of volunteer providers upon which it relies for many of services that Australians need.

When the possibility of providing financial compensation for firefighters was first raised with Australia's prime minister, Scott Morrison, he rejected the proposal, indicating that Australia depended on volunteerism for many of its welfare and emergency services.

While visiting an evacuation centre in Mudgee, Morrison stated that whether it was fighting fires, patrolling beaches, or supporting Meals on Wheels, Australia's system had and would 'always depend on having a large volunteer force to deal with these issues.'

<https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2019/12/24/paid-volunteer-firefighters/>

Morrison repeated this claim in an interview with radio 2GB, stating, 'We will always rely around the country on our volunteer forces, whether it's on fires or surf lifesaving or anything else.' <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2019/12/scott-morrison-volunteer-firefighters-bushfire-australia/>

Sky News commentator Peta Credlin, writing for The Daily Telegraph in an opinion piece published on December 28, 2019, has warned that paying volunteer firefighters will

ultimately lead to their work being seen as paid employment with all the bureaucratisation and increases in cost that this implies. Credlin has stated, 'While government might be gung-ho now and say paying them is a good idea, you can bet the cost will inevitably come back to us sooner rather than later in a "cost-recovery" manoeuvre.

Once paid, unions will get involved and demand the same rights as other paid workers – fair enough. So, there will be leave for this and leave for that and each time the pay deal is up for negotiation, be ready for union threats about strikes over the fire season unless demands are met.'

Credlin has further indicated that once this principle has been accepted among 'volunteer' firefighters it will spread to other groups of volunteers upon whom the country relies. Credlin has stated, 'It's a common purpose and a level of selflessness that we disrupt at our peril. Of course, once volunteers are paid, we will never be able to not pay them. Once we pay one class of volunteers too – firefighters in this immediate debate – there will be calls for others undertaking similar life or death risk to also be remunerated; lifesavers and SES volunteers immediately come to mind. How long will it be before using a public beach in Australia then attracts a \$10 fee to cover the cost of lifesavers?'

<https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/peta-credlin-is-paying-volunteer-fire-fighters-worth-the-ultimate-price/news-story/79a48bfb60ea64005aa22465ad6d44cc>

The New South Wales Emergency Services Minister, David Elliott, has similarly claimed that once this supposedly one-off payment has been made it will become entrenched and will spread to other services currently manned by volunteers. Elliot has stated, 'If we pay one volunteer emergency services organisation we are going to have to pay them all. That would be a very difficult thing to do.'

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/pay-threat-to-volunteer-ethos/news-story/239f5333ed52c4fd06a83605bd4dda62>

An editorial published in The Canberra Times on December 31, 2019, offers a similar warning. Referring only to making payment to firefighters in New South Wales over the 2019/20 fire period, it suggests that this provision is not only likely to spread to the other states and territories but is also likely to become permanent.

The editorial states, 'This is a payment to volunteers and there will be enormous pressure now on the other states to make similar deals with the Commonwealth - and it will be enormously difficult to undo next year.'

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6561180/morrison-right-to-hesitate-over-paying-volunteer-firefighters/>

## **Further implications**

The concern regarding the payments to be given firefighters seems to stem primarily from apprehension that it will undermine the system of volunteers upon which Australia has so long relied for its regional fire defence.

A volunteer force has two primary advantages – it is flexible, and it is inexpensive. The two features are interdependent. Australia is a large country and bushfires are spontaneous and traditionally difficult to predict with precision. Maintaining a paid fire fighting force to deal with sporadic events would be both inefficient and costly.

Firefighters need what is termed 'surge capacity', that is, the ability to summon large numbers of people rapidly to deal with a particular incident at a given location. They also benefit from local knowledge so that they can use their familiarity with topography to help combat a fire.

Australia's regional fire fighters grew as a spontaneous response to need. The New South Wales Rural Fire Service (RFS) is currently the world's largest volunteer fire service, with more than 70,000 volunteers (plus around 900 paid staff). It started, however, with a series of small, community-based fire brigades, beginning with the first volunteer bush fire brigade in

Berrigan in 1896. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/why-do-australia-s-bushfire-defences-rely-on-tens-of-thousands-of-volunteers>

Over time, independent community-based brigades became more and more connected, as the government passed laws to provide legal protections and standardise equipment and training. But it was only in 1997 that the Rural Fire Service we know today was officially created.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/why-do-australia-s-bushfire-defences-rely-on-tens-of-thousands-of-volunteers>

It has been argued that this service and similar organisations that have formed in the other states and territories do not want or require a paid workforce, that their members are motivated by the sense of mutual need and obligation which gave rise to the original community-based brigades from which the larger regional services have developed.

Neil Bibby, the former chief executive of Victoria's Country Fire Authority, has claimed that paying regional firefighters would be counterproductive as it would achieve nothing and may undermine the sense of community service which holds the groups together. Bibby has stated, 'Paying volunteers, it won't give you more of their time, it won't give you more energy out of them, and a lot of them would take that as an insult anyway.'

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/why-do-australia-s-bushfire-defences-rely-on-tens-of-thousands-of-volunteers>

However, there are others who are arguing that the purely volunteer model no longer fits Australia's bushfire fighting needs. Bushfires are no longer a sporadic, limited, seasonal event in Australia. Climate change is increasing the frequency of severe fire weather events and extending the fire season. Climate change-induced warming and drying of some regions is making it more likely fuel will be ignited by a spark and results in more intense fires, which behave unpredictably, spread rapidly, and pose significant challenges for fire services combatting them. <https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/sciencecommunication/2019/08/25/the-changing-nature-of-australias-bushfires/>

The Australian Climate Council has stated, 'Bushfire conditions are now more dangerous than in the past, and the risk to people and property has increased. For well over 20 years, scientists have warned that climate change would increase the risk of extreme bushfires in Australia. This warning was accurate. Scientists expect extreme fire weather will continue to become more frequent and severe...' <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/not-normal-climate-change-bushfire-web/>

These new firefighting conditions have placed unprecedented demands on volunteer firefighters. The length of time that they can now expect to be called away from their jobs and other commitments is now much greater.

It has been suggested that a system such as applies with the Army Reserve should be applied to volunteer fighters which would mean that they would automatically be paid for the time they give to fighting fires. The question of what limits would be applied to this would have to be addressed. In the current ad hoc compensation being paid firefighters in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia compensation kicks in for those who have fought fires for ten days or more. The appropriateness of this would need to be considered. It may, for example, be more equitable to pay volunteers for any time off work in the course of their firefighting duties. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-14/volunteer-firefighter-compensation-not-enough-qld-man-bushfires/11863312> It would also need to be determined who pays such compensation. Under the interim provisions that have applied for the fires over the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 government employees and those employed by large companies are to be paid by their employer.

The government will supply the payment for those employed by smaller employers. The long-term viability of this will need to be considered. It is possible, for example, that an additional surcharge might be placed on fire insurance to help meet this expense. However, it

would be unwise to do anything that would discourage people to take out fire insurance given the growing risk. <https://www.revenue.nsw.gov.au/taxes-duties-levies-royalties/insurance-duty>

Another area that will need to be addressed is the capacity of employers, especially small employers to maintain their businesses without the services of employees who have been drawn away for long term volunteer fire service.

<https://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/publications/factsheets-and-resources/your-workplace-rights-during-natural-disasters-and-emergencies#cs1>

There is also need to consider how to achieve improved co-ordination between fire fighting forces given that with the likelihood of much larger fires burning for much longer periods there will be a growing necessity to employ larger forces formed from the amalgamation of smaller local brigades.

The 2019/20 fires have also raised questions over the equipping of fire services. The popular consternation that has followed in the wake of reports that fire brigades were crowd funding or self-funding equipment such as chainsaws and high duty face masks suggests that this practice will be halted, and more formal funding arrangements will be made into the future. The prime minister, Scott Morrison, has indicated that his government is likely to establish a national royal commission to investigate issues raised by Australia's most recent bushfires. The questions raised above, and many others, will hopefully fall within its ambit.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-12/bushfire-royal-commission-proposal-to-go-to-cabinet-morrison/11860954>