

Wickham Wool Store fire – community update

The information below provides answers to questions asked by the community following the Wool Store fire in Wickham on Tuesday 1 March. For additional information and updates please visit the City of Newcastle website (newcastle.nsw.gov.au).

Working together for the community

The NSW Police are the lead agency coordinating the response to this incident. The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is working closely with the City of Newcastle, along with HAZMAT, Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW), Public Works Advisory, NSW Health and Safe Work, to provide support for community affected.

The EPA and Public Works Advisory have engaged specialists to do the assessment, clean-up and air monitoring for asbestos.

All these NSW Government departments are currently working together in response to the incident at an Emergency Operations Centre, run by NSW Police.

Affected area/extent of the contamination

Asbestos fragments from the roof of the fire-damaged buildings have travelled to neighbouring areas as a result of the smoke plume caused by the fire.

We have received reports of suspected asbestos in Wickham, Islington, Maryville, Tighes Hill and Waratah. Specialised air monitoring equipment has been set up across all impacted areas, and monitoring will continue throughout the clean-up. **Since the fire, no asbestos fibres have been detected by air monitors around impacted suburbs.**

Identifying and reporting suspected asbestos debris

If you suspect you have asbestos debris from the Wool Store fire on your property, please call the EPA's Environment Line on 131 555.

Asbestos specialists have advised that the asbestos is likely to be Super Six which was previously a commonly used construction material in older buildings and is now banned. You can visit the NSW Government [asbestos checker website](#) for more details.

It is important you understand what asbestos looks like. Please visit the NSW Government [website](#) for helpful information to assist you in identifying asbestos.



Asbestos debris. Photo: Hazmat Services

Assessment and clean-up process for homes

The EPA, FRNSW, Public Works Advisory, NSW Health and the City of Newcastle are all working together to help evacuated residents return to their homes as soon as possible. Clean-up is under way, and it is continuing to focus first on homes and public areas that have been most affected by

debris. The safety of residents is paramount as the clean-up progresses.

There are more than 70 independent clean-up personnel currently in the field, deployed by the City of Newcastle and Public Works Advisory. Their role is to remove identified asbestos debris based on advice from independent licensed asbestos assessors.

FRNSW have conducted rapid assessments of the area over the past week to assess and help determine the extent of impact. You may have seen them if you were at home. Based on information gathered from these FRNSW rapid assessments, and information reported from the community via Environment Line, we are prioritising the areas that have been classified as most impacted.

On Tuesday 8 March residents from the Avenue Apartments opposite the fire site were given the 'all clear' to return home.

If you reported suspected asbestos debris to the Environment Line you will be contacted shortly by a licensed asbestos assessor. The assessor will inspect your property and prepare a scope of works for cleaning any affected areas. Following this, a specialist asbestos removalist will be deployed to do any cleaning required.

The licensed asbestos assessor and specialist asbestos removalists need your permission to enter your property. Their role is to access, inspect and clean your property.

The licensed asbestos assessor will inspect your property after the clean and provide you with a clearance certificate.

Public Works Advisory Deed of Access

Residents who have reported their property via Environment Line will receive a visit from a licensed asbestos assessor. You will be presented with a hard copy Deed of Access Agreement. The Deed of Access Agreement is a Public Works Advisory document. It has been used in similar situations where properties require clean-up following an incident, for example in the bushfire clean-up.

Signing this document means you agree to a contractor accessing your property and the scope of works needed to clean-up your property.

A final asbestos clearance certificate will be completed and issued to you once the work has been completed and you have endorsed the completed works.

To assist you in understanding some of the key clauses, please see below:

*I/We consent to Public Works Advisory and other relevant NSW Government agencies and each of their contractors, subcontractors, officers, employees, agents, consultants, advisers and any other person acting for or on their behalf (**Associates**) entering the Property for the purposes of undertaking the following (**Activities**) relating to property damage associated with fire damage associated with the Wickham Wool Shed Fire that may include the following:*

- *inspecting the Property in company with the owner or the owner's representative;*
- *doing the agreed scope of environmental remediation works and other relevant activities on the Property as recorded in the Scope Register.*

This is requesting the owner to provide the contractor access and to agree (or not) to the scope of works proposed by the assessor. We can only perform cleaning in properties whose owners have signed this document. Community members may choose to engage their own private contractor.

I/We acknowledge that Public Works Advisory and other relevant NSW Government agencies:

- *have no legal liability for the presence of any asbestos in the Property; and*
- *have no legal duty to perform the Activities.*

This means that Public Works Advisory and other Government agencies did not cause the pollution and are not responsible. In New South Wales under the Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997 the polluter is responsible for cleaning up following a pollution incident. As community safety is paramount, we have organised to clean-up impacted properties.

Returning the Public Works Advisory Deed of Access Agreement

Some of you may have registered your email with us when you reported your property and received an electronic copy. You can sign and return a copy by emailing info@epa.nsw.gov.au after an assessor has visited your property and determined a scope of works. It can also be signed and given to the assessor in hard copy during their visit.

Clean-up costs

The EPA, City of Newcastle and Public Works Advisory have engaged specialists who have already started the clean-up.

In NSW, under the *Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997* the polluter is responsible for cleaning up following a pollution incident. In some emergencies, like this one, clean-up action must start as soon as possible to protect public health and safety and not wait for the responsible entity to be identified and to pay.

If residents have concerns, they may wish to engage their own asbestos specialist to do an assessment. If you choose to engage a private assessor you are responsible for these costs. You may wish to speak to your insurer. An accredited asbestos removalist can be contacted through the

Asbestos Removal Contractors Association
(02) 8586 3555.

Clean-up of public areas

The City of Newcastle is leading the clean-up of public roadways to keep them open. Roads are being assessed and cleaned on a priority basis and significant progress has been made.

Impacted public areas such as Islington Park (including the dog park) remain closed but are being inspected and cleaned, and will receive clearance before they are reopened to the public.

Assessment and clean-up of community facilities such as schools, TAFE and childcare centres are being prioritised by the Department of Education and Public Works Advisory to ensure minimum disruption to these services.



Asbestos debris. Photo: Hazmat Services

Air monitoring

Since the fire, no asbestos fibres have been detected by air monitors around impacted suburbs.

On a daily basis air monitoring is being done in areas where asbestos removal is happening, around the demolition zone and at various locations throughout Maryville, Wickham, Islington, Waratah and Tighes Hill. All air monitoring results to date have been below the limit of detection.

Air monitoring is through portable machines which have been specially deployed across all impacted areas, with monitoring to continue throughout the clean-up.

A sample is collected by drawing a measured quantity of air through a membrane filter using a sampling pump. Any breathable fibres are then

sized and counted in accordance with a technical criteria, using specialist analytics equipment. The results are shown as fibres per millilitre of air.

Hazmat Services Licensed Asbestos Assessors are responsible for air monitoring. The results are analysed at a laboratory accredited by the National Association of Testing Authorities, Australian (NATA).

Air monitoring will continue throughout the clean-up.

Impacts to human health

NSW Health have provided advice in relation to the health risks associated with this incident. The risk of adverse health outcomes is dependent on the amount of asbestos fibres breathed in and is generally associated with continued exposure to a

large numbers of fibres over long periods of time (usually in occupational settings).

During and since the fire, there has been prolonged rainfall which helps prevent fibres from becoming airborne. Information from FRNSW rapid assessment reports indicates that debris from the fire that landed on properties was fragments of bonded asbestos with some loose fibres. The wetting of these fragments, either by hoses or by rain, has prevented fibres from becoming airborne.

Not disturbing fragments of bonded asbestos also prevents asbestos fibres becoming airborne. Any remaining fragments should not be disturbed by people or pets. Please consider this advice when doing activities around your home prior to and during clean-up.

Areas that are suspected to be contaminated should not be used until the asbestos fragments have been safely removed.

Advice for residents at home

The risk of adverse health outcomes is dependent on the amount of asbestos fibres breathed in and is generally associated with continued exposure to a large numbers of fibres over long periods of time (usually in occupational settings).

Exposure to asbestos from disturbing asbestos-containing material may pose health risks. It is strongly recommended that a licensed asbestos removalist is used to assess and remove asbestos safely from your property.

If you are concerned about material that might be asbestos at your home, there are simple steps you can take:

- Keep materials wet.
- Stay indoors and keep windows shut.
- Do not disturb the suspected asbestos materials.

Comprehensive information regarding removal of asbestos is available at asbestos.nsw.gov.au.

You may wish to contact your insurance company who can provide advice about your specific circumstances.



Asbestos debris on a road. Photo: Hazmat Services

Advice for evacuated residents returning home

The EPA, FRNSW, Public Works Advisory and the City of Newcastle are working together to allow evacuated residents return to their homes as soon as possible. The clean-up will continue to focus first on homes and public areas that have been most affected by debris. The safety of residents is paramount as the clean-up progresses.

Interim asbestos clearance certificates have been issued to occupants of 'The Avenue' apartments. These residents are now able to return to their homes.

The EPA and Public Works Advisory are working towards the issue of Interim Asbestos Clearance certificates for all occupants of SoQue apartments within the coming week to get those residents back home as soon as possible.

Further information and support

For more information please visit the City of Newcastle website: newcastle.nsw.gov.au .

If you need to call the EPA's Environment Line you can reach us on 131 555.

Residents experiencing extreme hardship as a result of the incident may be eligible to the Commonwealth one-off Crisis Payment if specific criteria are met.

If you or someone you know needs help, the Mental Health Line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to everyone in NSW by calling 1800 011 511.

NSW Environment Protection Authority

Email: info@epa.nsw.gov.au

Website: www.epa.nsw.gov.au

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