

NSW State Emergency Service Volunteers Association- Fuel Support Program

Overview

A Fuel Support Program delivered by the New South Wales State Emergency Service Volunteers Association (NSW SESVA) to assist SES volunteers during the current fuel crisis represents a practical and compassionate initiative designed to support the wellbeing of volunteers and their families while ensuring that emergency response capability across New South Wales is maintained.

Recent communications and media reports indicate that fuel shortages, supply limitations, and accessibility delays are occurring across parts of New South Wales. These shortages are particularly concerning in regional, rural, and remote communities, where emergency service volunteers must often travel significant distances to respond to incidents and support their local communities.

While some fuel supplies may be prioritised for emergency service vehicles, the approximately 10,000 volunteers of the NSW State Emergency Service generally rely on their private vehicles and personal fuel supplies to attend training, maintain operational readiness, travel to SES units, and crew rescue vehicles during emergency incidents.

Fuel shortages and rising fuel prices place additional financial pressure on volunteers and their households. When combined with broader increases in the cost of living driven by higher fuel prices—including increases in food, transport, utilities, and other essential goods—these pressures may impact volunteers' ability to respond to emergencies or attend operational activities.

The NSW SESVA Fuel Support Program aims to reduce these pressures while helping ensure that emergency response to communities across New South Wales is not delayed due to fuel access limitations.

As outlined by NSW SESVA President Kim Davis ESM:

"Everyone from the SESVA to the Commissioner and Government can work together to do their part to ensure there is no delay to emergency response capability across New South Wales."

Program Delivery

The NSW SESVA Fuel Support Program will operate across three key pillars: advocacy, welfare and personal support, and professional assistance.

Welfare and Personal Support

Welfare support remains a core function of the NSW SESVA. For nearly three decades, the Association has delivered structured welfare support programs for SES volunteers and their families during times of crisis and hardship.

The NSW SESVA welfare framework is well-established, structured, and responsive, providing practical assistance and personal support to volunteers impacted by major incidents, natural disasters, or broader societal challenges.

The proposed fuel support initiative builds upon this long-standing welfare capability by recognising that volunteers should not be financially disadvantaged for serving their communities during a period of rising fuel costs and fuel supply constraints.

Support measures may include:

- Direct fuel vouchers provided to affected volunteers
- Emergency fuel assistance grants
- Direct welfare assistance where financial pressures arise due to fuel shortages or increased fuel costs

These measures aim to help reduce financial stress on volunteers and maintain the ability of SES members to respond to emergencies.

Professional Support

In addition to welfare assistance, the program will include practical operational support mechanisms designed to assist volunteers in maintaining emergency response capability.

This may include:

- Direct fuel vouchers provided to affected volunteers
- Direct fuel support provided to SES members and volunteers in critical need

Where fuel access becomes severely limited, particularly in regional, rural, or remote communities, the NSW SESVA has the capability to provide direct fuel delivery assistance.

Members of the NSW SESVA include individuals who are dangerous goods qualified, allowing the safe transport of fuel supplies.

The Association has the operational capability to transport:

- Up to 800 litres of diesel per trip
- Up to 200 litres of unleaded fuel per trip

These deliveries would be prioritised for regional and remote communities where fuel is not available locally, and where volunteers may be unable to leave their communities due to the need to maintain emergency response coverage.

It should be noted that the NSW SESVA:

- Does not have access to discounted fuel
- Does not have access to government or emergency fuel reserves
- Does not have access to any form of reserved or restricted fuel supplies

The Association will therefore obtain fuel supplies through normal retail channels at the same prices paid by all Australians.

Fuel supplies will be sourced wherever available in order to provide direct support to volunteers and communities where fuel availability becomes critical.

The NSW SESVA does not own vehicles and relies on the use of its members personal private vehicles.

Advocacy Program

A significant component of the NSW SESVA Fuel Support Program is advocacy, which will occur across two key areas:

- Advocacy to the NSW State Emergency Service
- Advocacy to the New South Wales and Federal Government

The purpose of this advocacy is to ensure that volunteers are supported during the fuel crisis and that emergency response capability is maintained.

Advocacy to the NSW State Emergency Service

The NSW SESVA encourages the NSW SES to implement practical operational measures to support volunteers during this period.

Suggested measures include:

1. SES unit vehicles to be made available to volunteers so that members can access emergency fuel and reduce delays associated with fuel shortages when responding to incidents.
2. Access to SES fleet or pool vehicles, including those located in metropolitan areas or at State Headquarters, to support operational activities in areas experiencing fuel shortages. These vehicles may allow volunteers to access emergency fuel supplies and may provide visibility when accessing fuel at restricted service stations or those with substantial queue and wait times.
3. Acknowledgement by the NSW SES of the financial and operational hardships volunteers may face during this period, and communication of support measures available to members.
4. Expansion of online learning and remote training opportunities to minimise travel requirements for volunteers during the fuel shortage.
5. Review of non-emergency vehicle usage across the SES to determine whether vehicles currently used for non-operational purposes can be temporarily reassigned to operational units to support emergency response activities and minimise fuel costs and delays to volunteers.
6. Minimisation of travel requirements for volunteers, including encouraging work, study, and meetings to occur remotely wherever possible during this period.
7. Enabling SES volunteers to use SES vehicles to travel to all training, including external such as NSW SESVA Mental Health courses.

Advocacy to the New South Wales and Federal Government

The NSW SESVA also encourages the NSW and Federal Government to consider measures that recognise the important role of emergency service volunteers and assist them during the fuel crisis.

Potential government support measures may include:

1. Consideration of fuel tax relief, similar to that provided to primary producers for off-road fuel use, where fuel used by SES volunteers for SES activities may qualify for a tax reduction or rebate.
2. Fuel access or promotion schemes, enabling SES volunteers to access restricted or priority fuel supplies during periods of shortage.
3. Access to government agency fuel supplies, including fuel stored by local councils or other government agencies, for use by SES volunteers during operational activities.
4. Removal of fuel purchase limits for SES volunteers, recognising their role as emergency responders and reducing the number of trips volunteers undertake into towns to access fuel.
5. Front-of-line access at petrol stations for SES volunteers responding to emergency incidents to reduce delays during critical response periods.
6. Consideration of tax reimbursement arrangements for fuel expenses incurred by SES volunteers during this declared period.
7. Alternative financial incentives or assistance for volunteers who do not pay income tax, ensuring equitable support to offset increased fuel costs and cost-of-living pressures.

Risks to Volunteers

SES volunteers dedicate their time freely to protect communities during floods, storms, rescues, and other emergencies. Unlike many government employees, volunteers frequently absorb personal costs associated with volunteering, including travel to training, operational deployments, and routine unit activities.

During periods of fuel shortages and rising fuel prices, these costs may become a significant financial burden for volunteer households.

Volunteers require fuel not only to respond to emergencies but also to attend training sessions, maintain equipment, and ensure operational readiness at their SES units.

Importantly, SES volunteers generally do not have access to emergency fuel allocations as they rely on their private vehicles and personally funded fuel to reach their units and respond to incidents.

Risks to Communities

Fuel shortages may also create broader risks for communities across New South Wales.

These risks may include:

- Reduced volunteer availability due to fuel access constraints

- Delayed response times due to queues or travel required to obtain fuel
- Reduced participation in training, equipment maintenance, and preparedness activities

These factors have the potential to impact the overall readiness and responsiveness of emergency services, particularly in regional and rural areas where volunteers may already travel significant distances to respond to incidents

Broader Emergency Services Application

While this initiative is proposed by the NSW SES Volunteers Association, the principles of the program may also be applicable across the broader emergency services sector.

Many emergency services in New South Wales rely heavily on volunteers who face similar financial pressures associated with rising fuel costs and fuel shortages.

Programs of this nature could be adopted or supported by government agencies, unions, and representative organisations across emergency services including:

- VRA Rescue NSW
- Marine Rescue NSW
- NSW Rural Fire Service
- Surf Life Saving organisations
- Other volunteer emergency response agencies

Encouraging similar support initiatives would demonstrate a coordinated whole-of-sector approach to supporting emergency service volunteers during times of national or state-level supply disruption.

The NSW SES Volunteers Association

Since 1997, the NSW SES Volunteers Association has remained the only independent association advocating for and supporting the approximately 10,000 volunteers of the NSW State Emergency Service.

The NSWSESVA provides support services at no cost to volunteers, ensuring members can access advocacy, welfare, and representation without financial barriers.

In addition to advocacy and welfare support, the NSW SESVA also works to raise awareness of emerging risks, operational challenges, and emergency situations that may place volunteers or the broader community at risk.

By identifying and communicating these risks early, the Association aims to ensure that volunteers, emergency service leadership, and government stakeholders can respond collaboratively to emerging challenges.

Major support initiatives delivered by the NSWSESVA include:

- Drought Support Programs

- Flood Support Programs
- Storm and Major Event Support Programs
- Fire Support Programs
- COVID Support Programs
- First Responder resilience Program

The NSW SESVA also owns and operates a training and wellness facility of 100ac in rural NSW.

The NSW SESVA raises fund through the sale of raffles tickets, managed by the National State Emergency Service Association (NSESVA).