

Blazing row over bushfires

EXCLUSIVE

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NATIONAL parks rangers are heading for a showdown with the state government over proposed budget cuts they claim will seriously hamper firefighting work.

As firefighting agencies brace for continuing fire threats across the State, rangers returning from firefight-

ing duties in Western Australia and Tasmania have learned their pay is set to be slashed for future operations.

The Public Service Association of NSW said the State Government wants to cut the number of rangers working on weekends while also removing special loading for after-hours work. The union claims the move will seriously affect the availability of rangers on weekends to undertake duties such as firefighting.

Other duties performed on weekends include law enforcement, checking on campgrounds and search and rescue operations. Union figures show there are 212 National Parks and Wildlife Service rangers managing the national park estate and more than 30 million visitors, with a further 50 positions unfilled.

PSA general secretary Anne Gardiner said rangers were told of the plan on returning from fighting fires interstate,

duties they claim they will no longer be able to perform should the cuts go ahead.

"It's deplorable that while our rangers are working hard in other states to protect communities from major bushfires the State Government is plotting to cut the vital service they provide here in NSW," Ms Gardiner said.

"National Parks are a major weekend and holiday destination for thousands of families and they rely on the

experienced efforts of rangers to maintain a safe leisure environment. More than 100 rangers have been deployed this fire season to help interstate colleagues battle blazes."

The union claims the government is planning to scrap a loading of 17 per cent applied to weekends while reducing overall ranger numbers.

A senior park ranger said staff were angered by the cost cuts given they were being implemented at the same time

as millions of dollars were being injected into new sporting grounds.

"The government is pumping millions into new sporting grounds," the ranger said. "There's no bigger or better ground than our national parks, where millions of people enjoy getting outdoors and active."

A spokesperson for the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage said formal talks would occur with unions over their conditions this week.