Australia: A grim start to the summer bushfire season

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Bushfires in southeastern Australia over the past three weeks have ravaged more than 880,000 hectares or 2.1 million acres, damaging small towns and seriously impacting on local economies. Fortunately only one person has been killed, and a sudden burst of cold weather on Christmas Day helped to contain or put out several fires. However, the intensity and scope of the blazes and their early arrival indicates that Australia's annual bushfire season—usually three or four months long—will be one of exceptional severity.

In eastern Victoria, scores of townships were menaced during December by fires fanned by winds of up to 120 kilometres per hour. The blazes cut a swathe through native forests and blanketed the state capital Melbourne with a heavy smoke haze, lifting pollution 10 times above normal levels for several days. Tasmania has also been hard hit, with over 12,000 hectares and scores of houses destroyed in the island state's northeast. Last month, large fires raged in the Blue Mountains, near Sydney, in New South Wales.

Just before Christmas, Melbourne newspapers reported dozens of hamlets and villages in eastern Victoria under threat with stories of inhabitants battling to reduce undergrowth and implement other measures to defend their homes. In windy conditions burning embers fly ahead of the fire-front and ignite roofs in what is known as an "ember attack". Residents spent sleepless nights attempting to guard against this danger while farmers worked to douse spot fires that threatened their properties and stock.

At least 32 houses burnt down in Victoria and an alpine ski lodge was destroyed at Mount Buffalo national park. While no towns are currently threatened—rain and unseasonal snow on Christmas Day having dampened the blazes—a few days earlier fire menaced the Mount Buller ski resort on three sides and the town of Dargo.

Stories of narrow escapes abound. One Victorian couple drove their burning car for more than three kilometres through a firestorm before being rescued by a fire crew. In the face of a rapidly advancing fire front another woman put her three daughters and two dogs in her car and drove through flames into a local dam to seek some protection.

Many rural residents face financial ruin from the fires, with stock killed and other property destroyed, while tourist resorts in and around the high plains have been hard hit by the cancellation of summer holiday bookings.

In eastern Victoria, a "monster" fire comprising five smaller ones that joined together is still burning but curtailed by the rain and cold conditions. Fire-fighting authorities warned, however, that this could change rapidly. Country Fire Authority (CFA) spokesman Peter Barker told the press: "Once the cooler conditions revert back to being warm, it'll only take a couple of days for the hot spots, if we can't get to them, to flare again."

Much of southern and eastern Australian is being ravaged by drought (See "Chronic drought conditions create hardship in Australian rural areas"). In September, Victoria had the lowest monthly rainfall ever recorded, and up to 200 bushfires. With bone-dry undergrowth for fuel, all that is needed for a conflagration is high temperatures, low humidity and strong winds—conditions that typify summer in southeastern Australia.

Due to the protracted drought, bushfires over the past few years have not conformed to expected patterns. In fact, the current fires are capable of burning with just as much intensity during the night—when it was more usual for bushfires to slow down given slightly lower

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temperatures. Observers also note that after the severe fire season of 2003, burnt out areas of forest did not fully regenerate because of low rainfall and lack of moisture in the soil. Bushland areas are therefore exceedingly dry and combustible.

Along with helicopter water bombers, fire-spotting aircraft, fixed-wing aircraft, 480 water tankers and 180 bulldozers, more than 4,300 firefighters have been mobilised in Victoria, including some from New Zealand and neighbouring New South Wales, to battle the fires.

While bushfires are a regular occurrence in Australia, government policies have worsened the dangers. Rural communities have been hard hit by the systematic rundown of services—schools, hospitals, railways and banking—and the loss of jobs. Fire services have also been undermined.

Rural firefighting relies almost entirely on unpaid volunteers. The CFA, which covers 150,000 square kilometres, has 58,000 volunteers but only 1,100 paid staff. According to press reports, there has been a considerable decline in the number of CFA volunteers since 1983, due to declining rural populations and the difficulty of getting time off work to fight fires. Federal and state governments have, however, consistently rejected calls for an increase in full-time firefighters.

The Howard government claims that employers cannot sack volunteer fire fighters. But on December 14, Peter Awty, a father of two, was dismissed from his job after taking two and half days off to fight a bush fire. His employer told the media he was sacked for failing to meet production targets. "[W]e're a manufacturing company, and we have to keep our production levels up to a certain level," he said.

At the same time, the outlay for rural fire prevention is miniscule. The state Labor government in Victoria has allocated only $252 million from 2004/5 to 2007/8 for rural fire prevention, even though it has a large budget surplus and provided $1.4 billion in land, payroll and WorkCover tax cuts to companies in this year's state budget.

In 2003, ferocious fires in Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory burnt out an area three times the size of Britain. Four people were killed and 530 houses incinerated in the suburbs of Canberra. Federal and state governments conducted inquiries and debate has continued over the principal causes of the fires. The Howard government accused state governments of bad land management and the Victorian government asserted that the primary problem was climate change.

A 2005 report by the Commonwealth Scientific and Research Organisation does point to significant climate change. It indicates that since 1950 there has been an increase in the annual mean temperature by about one degree centigrade and an increase of about five in the number of days a year above 35 degrees centigrade—days of high fire risk. The report predicts that there is likely to be about 23 percent more high fire risk days by 2020.

While state and federal governments blame each other, both ignore the central question, which is their totally inadequate response to bushfires. Despite regular fire disasters, there is no national, centrally financed and organised body to prepare for and fight fires or to restore damaged areas.

As for the Victorian government, the Department of Sustainability and the Environment has been ordered to develop a "365 day model" of fire management. But any new staff will be employed on three-year fixed contracts and will work only part time—between October and May.

Notwithstanding government claims of concern, no serious effort is being made to protect ordinary people from bushfires. Those facing the infernos that grip Australian rural and bushland areas each year are forced to rely on their own devices and under-funded volunteer services.

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