

# Bushfires hit five Australian states

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Major bushfires have erupted in five Australian states during the past four days, and there are predictions that this year's bushfire season could be one of the nation's worst. As yet, no deaths or serious injuries have been recorded, but an estimated 100 people remain unaccounted for in Tasmania, the worst-hit state.

The fires are being fuelled by heavy forest growth, dry grasslands and extreme heat-wave conditions, with the mercury hitting new records in many areas. Temperatures climbed to around 40 degrees Celsius (104 F) in three state capitals—Melbourne, Adelaide and Hobart—on Friday. Several Australian towns hit 47C.

In Tasmania, more than 100 buildings have been seriously damaged or destroyed, 120,000 hectares of bushland, forest and farmland incinerated, and roads, electricity and phone lines cut in parts of the island.

Tasmania Fire Service Chief Officer Mike Brown said conditions on Friday had reached “catastrophic level,” according to the rating system developed in the aftermath of the Black Saturday fires that killed more than 170 people in Victoria in 2009.

Over 2,000 people in Tasmania's south-east had to evacuate on Friday and early Saturday morning, mostly by sea. Tourists visiting the historic Port Arthur site on the Tasman Peninsula, south of Hobart, were among those rescued. Hundreds of people are now homeless and being accommodated in emergency shelters. Many small township and farming residents face financial ruin, with stock killed and other property destroyed. Tourism centres have also suffered significant damage.

Dunalley, a small Tasman Peninsula town, was gutted on Friday, with 65 homes, the Returned Services club and the local school destroyed. Survivors described trees “exploding like firecrackers” amid 10-metre flames as the fire approached. The inferno extended right to the waterline. Dunalley resident Bryan Webster told the *Hobart Mercury* that he and his family had narrowly escaped death by running ahead of a “tsunami

of fire ... a red-purple wall of intense heat.” The family finally fled to the end of a jetty. It was “the closest that I have ever been to hell,” Webster said.

Twenty fires continue burning throughout the state, including on the Tasman Peninsula, at Bicheno and other towns in the state's east, and at Lake Repulse, where 60,000 hectares of forest and bushland have been destroyed in the Upper Derwent Valley, north of Hobart. Tasmania's over-stretched and under-resourced emergency services are unable to predict when they will be able to contain the fires.

More than 40 fires have been reported in South Australia, including major blazes on Friday near Finnis, about 80 kilometres south of Adelaide, Sevenhill in the Clare Valley in the north, and on the Yorke Peninsula. These fires have since been brought under control, but not before the Finnis fire burnt out over 300 hectares.

Serious fires are also ablaze in Victoria, New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland, with officials warning that extreme temperatures and lightning strikes could set off more. Yesterday, Victorian emergency authorities said there were 128 fires across the state, with new ones “popping up all the time.” A large fire had decimated 3,000 hectares just north of Portland, in the state's south-west, and another fire erupted out of control on Friday at Ensay, in the state's east.

On Saturday, there were 13 fires in Queensland and more than 70 in NSW, as temperatures in far western and southern NSW exceeded 45C. While NSW coastal areas have escaped the extreme temperatures affecting the rest of south-eastern Australia, this will change tomorrow. Sydney and the nearby Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions are expected to reach more than 43C on Tuesday and the rest of the week.

NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons told the media that the state was about to experience the most dangerous bushfire conditions seen

in “many, many years.”

Bushfires are a regular occurrence in Australia, but a study by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Bureau of Meteorology in late 2011 found that climate change was increasing bushfire risk across south-east Australia. It predicted Forest Fire Danger Index days were likely to increase in frequency from 4 to 25 percent of the year by 2020.

Every year, the media reports heroic efforts by residents and firefighters during the summer but there is a deafening silence about how governments—state and federal alike—have contributed to the worsening dangers during the bushfire season, threatening the safety and lives of ordinary people, as well as emergency service personnel.

Federal and state authorities, which provide miniscule amounts of direct funding and heavily rely on volunteers to staff rural fire services, have consistently rejected calls for additional full-time fire fighters, coordinated national action, properly resourced evacuation facilities and other rudimentary fire safety measures. Demands for increased resources following Victoria’s disastrous 2009 Black Saturday fires have been largely ignored.

According to “A Fire Safe Community” report in January 2012, Tasmania has one of the lowest numbers of full-time fire fighters per capita in Australia, and the worst response time to fire calls.

In Victoria, \$66 million was stripped from the firefighting budget last year, including \$40 million from the Country Fire Authority. The NSW government is cutting \$70 million from its services over the next four years, and the Queensland government has slashed firefighters’ jobs.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard feigned concern over the plight of fire victims when she visited Tasmania today, claiming that her government was “standing with them in every way.” But when asked by the media on Saturday if the government would provide financial assistance to victims, she had attempted to dodge the question, declaring that the main focus was “fighting the fires.”

At today’s media conference in Hobart, Gillard offered nothing apart from the standard federal relief package for natural disaster victims, which was announced on Sunday. Those affected can apply for

\$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child—a pittance compared to the losses suffered, particularly by those who have lost their homes and livelihoods.

Once again, the reality is that bushfire survivors and all those living in fire-prone districts are largely being left to fend for themselves because the provision of adequate, up-to-date emergency services and trained fire fighters is incompatible with the crisis-ridden private profit system, which is now dictating deep cuts to all essential services.



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