

Australia: Hundreds of bushfires as heatwave continues

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Driven by a record-breaking heatwave, more than 300 bushfires, some still out of control, continue to burn across the southeastern Australian states of Tasmania, New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. They have already destroyed large areas of bush and farmland, and scores of homes and other properties. About 450,000 hectares, or 1.1 million acres, has been burnt in the three states so far.

A “dome of heat” has covered much of the country over the past week, producing extreme fire dangers for residents and over-stretched, under-funded fire fighters. The Bureau of Meteorology reported that Monday was the hottest day in Australia’s recorded history, with a national average maximum of 40.33C (104.6 Fahrenheit). The bureau added two new colour bars—pink and purple—to its graphs and maps, to signify temperatures over 50C and 54C respectively.

Four parts of NSW were yesterday declared “catastrophic”—the highest fire danger rating. Temperatures soared, with Sydney, Australia’s largest city, peaking at 42.3C. There were more than 140 fires across the state, 31 of them uncontrolled for periods.

Ultimately, no lives were lost yesterday, and only two homes were destroyed in NSW, together with an estimated 20 homes in Victoria. Severe dangers continue to face residents throughout the country, however, including in Tasmania, where fires destroyed 128 homes and other buildings last Friday and Saturday.

Fires in central Northern Territory, near Alice Springs, also forced the evacuation of the King’s Canyon Resort and the Aboriginal community of Lilla.

State government fire and emergency service authorities have been issuing evacuation orders and warning residents to escape approaching fires, rather than try to save their properties, as previously

advocated under the official “stay or go” policy. Many of the 173 people killed in Victoria’s 2009 Black Saturday fires are estimated to have lost their lives as a result of the old policy (see: “Australia: Government culpability in 2009 Victorian bushfires”).

Tasmania, which has just over 500,000 people, has suffered the worst home and farm property destruction. This morning, the Tasmanian Fire Service reported that 19 fires remained uncontrolled. The most dangerous blaze, on the Tasman Peninsula, was heading for the small township of Eaglehawk Neck.

That fire started last Thursday, near the town of Forcett, over 30 kilometres away. Over the past five days, it has swept southward through the Copping, Dunalley and Murdunna townships, burning over 22,000 hectares and leaving a trail of destruction. Up to 100 people are still being treated as missing, with searchers continuing to comb the rubble of destroyed homes.

All three Tasmanian government organisations responsible for fire management—the Tasmanian Fire Service, Forestry Tasmania and the Parks and Wildlife Services—have suffered cutbacks and under-resourcing in recent years.

In January 2012, a University of Newcastle report on Tasmanian fire safety found that the state had one of the lowest numbers of career firefighters and volunteers per capita in Australia, and the highest ratio of fire incidents. Tasmanians, the report warned, were “facing higher risk and experiencing more fires but having fewer fire fighting resources” than other Australians.

Like all Australian states, Tasmanian fire-fighting services are chronically under-funded and rely on the self-sacrifice of volunteers. The state has just over 290 full-time fire fighters and about 5,500 volunteers. Nationally, there are only 13,230 full-time fire fighters

and 219,000 volunteers.

In the 12 months to June 2012, 18 full-time jobs were axed from the Tasmanian Fire Service. A recent inquiry into a planned restructure of the Parks and Wildlife Service, which manages 35 percent of all land in Tasmania, found that it suffered from a severe lack of funds. The service had previously stopped replacing resigning or retiring staff, cutting the number of full-time fire fighting staff from 50 to 12. About 136 reserve staff could be mobilised in emergencies.

The under-funding has led to a dramatic drop in the number of pre-emptive controlled burns. In 2009-2010 there were 36 controlled burns, covering 6,400 hectares. In 2011-2012, this was reduced to 27, covering 1,927 hectares. The Labor-Greens government of Premier Lara Gidings has ignored calls by the fire and parks and wildlife services for more financing for hazard reduction burns.

Forestry Tasmania, which is also involved in forest fire fighting, only has 206 trained staff. It depends on contractors to provide the bulk of manpower to fight fires. Cuts in the number of contractors, however, have undermined the organisation's capacities and its access to vital heavy equipment.

According to the Tasmanian Fire Service, fire breaks, access road fire trails, bridges and water storages maintained by Forestry Tasmania were "in poor condition and likely to deteriorate further into the future."

These reports point to the perilously under-equipped and under-manned state of firefighting services across Australia, endangering the lives of thousands of people. That is the direct responsibility of successive state and federal governments—Labor and Liberal alike.

With Australia's summer bushfire season only entering its second month, the risk of further destruction, and loss of life, remains high. Temperatures have dropped in parts of Victoria, Tasmania and NSW during the past 24 hours, but new heat records are expected over the weekend.



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