

Australian fire-fighting budget cuts place lives at risk

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Serious fires continue to burn in the south-eastern Australian states of Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales (NSW), with temperatures climbing back above 40C (104F) in many areas.

The largest fire this week began on Sunday in the Warrumbungle National Park, near the north-western NSW town of Coonabarabran. The scientifically important Siding Spring Observatory, which houses the largest optical telescope in Australia, narrowly escaped destruction, but the fire incinerated about 50 homes and 45,000 hectares (111,000 acres). NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said it was one of "the most, ferocious, intense, fast-moving bushfires that we have seen in decades."

On Thursday, fire-fighters were attempting to deal with 84 bush and grass fires, 14 of them uncontrolled, around NSW, including continuing blazes at Deans Gap in the Shoalhaven area and at Yarrabin in the Cooma-Monaro area, both in the state's south. More than 500,000 hectares of the bush and farmland have been burnt in NSW over the past two weeks.

In Victoria, a rapidly moving fire that began late on Thursday evening in the Alpine National Park quickly moved south into Gippsland, in the state's east, destroying bushland and homes. The fire expanded overnight from about 950 hectares to 25,000 hectares, isolating the small community of Licola and threatening the nearby towns of Seaton, Dawson, Glenmaggie and Heyfield. Spotting—where embers are blown ahead of major fires, sparking new blazes—has become a major problem in the area.

In Tasmania, more than 130 homes and 20,000 hectares have been destroyed since early January. The Lake Repulse fire is still burning in the Upper Derwent Valley, north of the state capital Hobart, and threatens to intensify as temperatures climb over the weekend.

Fire bans are also in place for most of South Australia, with temperatures expected to reach the mid-40C range this weekend. Six regions in the state are currently experiencing extreme fire danger.

While Australia is one of the most bush-fire prone countries in the world, its fire-fighting services are organised on a state-by-state basis and rely heavily on thousands of unpaid volunteers. Over the past year, the seriously under-funded and under-equipped services, both professional and voluntary, have been subjected to systematic cutbacks.

The cuts, which have eroded fire and emergency services capacities, are part of ongoing reductions to vital social services—health, education and welfare—by federal Labor government and state Liberal governments.

Currently there are just over 13,000 full-time fire fighters in Australia, with more than 219,000 unpaid volunteers, drawn from local communities. The NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS), the largest agency, has a volunteer base of over 70,000 and operates more than 7,000 vehicles.

NSW Emergency Services Minister Michael Gallagher acknowledged last year that the current summer bushfire season had "the potential to be one of the worst in years." Yet, the state Liberal government, following on from the previous Labor government reductions, announced in last year's budget that it was slashing staff funding to the RFS by \$11.7 million over four years. The move is expected to axe at least 120 jobs, or 1 in 8 full-time positions.

The state government also wound back the Rural Fire Fighting Fund, which helps pay for a range of RFS operations, by \$8 million—from \$271 million to \$263 million for 2012-2013. In addition, it is cutting NSW Fire and Emergency, which employs most of the state's

full-time fire-fighters, by \$70 million over the next four years.

According to a recent review by the NSW auditor-general, total funding for the RFS has been reduced by almost 7 percent and the number of fire-fighting tankers supplied or refurbished has decreased from 216 to 177 during the past two years.

Similar cuts have been imposed by the Victorian state government on the Country Fire Authority (CFA). The CFA currently has a 44,000-strong volunteer base, down from 83,000 in 1998.

Last year, the Victorian Liberal government announced it would axe \$66 million from its fire services budget—\$41 million from the CFA and \$25 million from the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. Fifty paid CFA positions were also eliminated during the year, as a result of earlier budget decisions.

A recent CFA newsletter said the organisation would have to “reduce and defer building maintenance, reduce funds available for volunteer uniform expenditure,” manage volunteer recruitment and “encourage those brigades capable of doing so to fully fund their own initiatives.”

These cutbacks have been imposed despite Victoria’s catastrophic 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, which killed 173 people, including 23 children, and incinerated 450,000 hectares and 2,100 homes. Political responsibility for this heavy loss of life lies with the previous state Labor government of Premier John Brumby. Its so-called “stay or go” policy and other cost-cutting measures encouraged individuals to devise their own fire response plans and attempt to defend their homes when faced with approaching infernos.

A royal commission made limited criticisms and issued 67 recommendations to improve fire safety. More than two years after it handed down its final report, only 35 of the recommendations have been implemented. Less than 360 out of 850 fire trucks have received recommended fire safety upgrades and only one fire refuge is operational.

The Victorian government’s claims to have improved emergency communications were exposed on the first day of this month’s heatwave when the emergency web site crashed. The web site received 700 hits a second, double the level planned for by the CFA and state government.

Similar cuts are being imposed in other states. Up to

20 administrative positions are being slashed from the Queensland Rural Fire Service, and 18 full-time jobs from the Tasmanian Fire Services. In Western Australia, the Fire and Emergency Service Authority is not filling vacant positions and has been directed by the state government to reduce operating costs by almost \$400,000 during the current financial year.

None of these measures, or the previous years of gross under-funding by Liberal and Labor state governments alike, would have been possible without the political assistance provided by the two principal unions—the United Firefighters Union and the Fire Brigade Employees Union—that cover most professional fire-fighters.

Opposed to any national mobilisation of fire fighters, the unions have worked to dissipate their members’ concerns with harmless protests, while appealing to the various state administrations to negotiate cost-cutting and productivity deals. Fire union protests last year in Sydney and Melbourne attempted to promote illusions in the return of state Labor governments—that is, the same party that was responsible for the previous rounds of cutbacks.



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