

Major bushfires hit Australia's most populous state

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Scores of fires continue to burn out of control after firestorms, fanned by 100-kph winds, record high temperatures, low humidity and tinder dry bushland, swept through wide areas of New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, yesterday.

This is one of the earliest starts to the annual bushfire season and follows the country's warmest year on record. The first indication that the country was facing a premature fire season came on September 11, when major fires hit the Blue Mountains and outlying western Sydney suburbs (see: "Early, ominous start to Australian bushfire season"). These blazes, however, have been completely dwarfed by those that swept the state yesterday.

Major fires on Thursday raged to the north, south and west of Sydney and on the outskirts of regional cities of Lithgow and Newcastle as overstretched fire-fighting services attempted to deal with the rapidly moving fires. A massive dark orange smoke cloud hung over Sydney during the afternoon with reports of ash falling at Sydney's Coogee beach and in the CBD's Martin Place.

Power was cut to 8,500 homes, the Hume and Pacific highways closed for several hours, Newcastle Airport shut down, and hundreds of residents and children evacuated in a day described by fire fighting authorities as the "worst in decades." Hundreds of people in fire-affected areas spent the night in temporary evacuation shelters.

"We'll be counting [incinerated] properties in the dozens, if not the hundreds. We're talking about destructive fire grounds and some pretty extraordinary fire behaviour," Rural Fire Service commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons told the media yesterday.

State authorities have not yet made any official statement on the numbers of homes destroyed, or

fatalities. But yesterday a 63-year-old man suffered a heart attack and died while defending his home at Lake Munmorah. The state coroner has also visited burnt-out properties at Yellow Rock in the Blue Mountains. According to press reports, emergency personnel told some residents that people were feared dead in the area.

Amongst the worst hit areas were the Blue Mountain townships of Winmalee, Springwood and Yellow Rock, where at least 40 homes were destroyed.

Springwood and Winmalee were cut in half by a 30-metre high firestorm, which blew embers hundreds of metres ahead of the blaze, sparking spot fires. In one Winmalee street alone, 10 homes were incinerated.

Springwood residents told the media that the fire hit their township so quickly that fire and emergency crews were unable to reach many of the affected homes before they erupted into flames. One resident said she and her neighbours were forced to put out spot fires with wet towels as firefighters struggled to reach the town.

Hundreds of students from Ellison Public School and St Thomas Aquinas School had to be evacuated to the Springwood Public School and the Winmalee shopping centre respectively.

Emergency warnings were issued yesterday for Lithgow, Winmalee, Springwood, Dyalson and Heatherbrae on the state's central coast, at Balmoral, Yanderra and Bargo in the Southern Highlands and Wandandian on the south coast.

Last night up to 2,000 firefighters were trying to contain six major fires. This morning up to 100 fires were still burning in the state, 36 of them out of control. Firefighters have said that some blazes could take weeks to extinguish. Extra fire crews are being despatched from Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania today to relieve exhausted crews.

Emergency warnings remain in place for a bushfire in Ruttleys Road in Wyong on the central coast, which had incinerated 1,400 hectares of bushland by this morning, and for a fire at Lithgow.

While a cool change hit the fire affected areas late yesterday, there was no rain and temperatures are expected to peak again on Sunday. Springwood has had only about 40 millimetres of rain over the past month compared to its long-term average of about 200 millimetres.

The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and the Bureau of Meteorology reported in late 2011 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.

Yesterday NSW Liberal Premier Barry O'Farrell, whose government has imposed major cuts to the state's fire fighting services, said MPs whose electorates were affected by bushfires should leave parliament and help where they could.

"There is not much we can do except wish those extraordinary volunteers and paid firefighters out there every success and every luck," he declared. He later told the media that it would be a "miracle" if no lives were lost.

O'Farrell's "concerns" are a fraud. Australia is one of the most bushfire-fire prone countries in the world but his government, like his federal and state counterparts and their Labor predecessors, refuse to provide adequate and up-to-date fire emergency services.

In last year's budget the O'Farrell government slashed staff funding to the Rural Fire Service (RFS) by \$11.7 million over four years, a move expected to cost 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 firefighters, by \$70 million over the next four years.

The Australian continent is particularly prone to bushfires, but the lack of proper planning and the inadequacy of fire and emergency services has already

produced a series of terrible tragedies. In February 2009, more than 200 people were killed and over 2,000 homes were destroyed in the "Black Saturday" fires that swept through Victoria. In January this year, major blazes burned out of control across four states as temperatures across Australia hit record highs. Yet funds have continued to be cut to essential services setting the stage for further disasters in the long summer months ahead.



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