Heat wave and bush fires engulf southern Australia

Zac Hambides
17 January 2014

A heat wave is moving across the south of the Australian continent, bringing record high temperatures and bush fires. South Australia's Country Fire Service (CFS) co-ordinator Brenton Eden described the climatic conditions as a "perfect storm" on Wednesday. Following destructive fires near the Western Australian capital of Perth last weekend, the eastward movement of the heat wave brought with it thousands of lightning strikes that sparked more than 400 serious blazes in South Australia and 256 in neighbouring Victoria. At one point, the CFS received reports of fires every minute.

Sixteen fires continue to burn out of control in South Australia, threatening small rural communities. The CFS reported this morning that at least 100,000 hectares of bushland has gone up in flames since Tuesday. An additional five water-bombing aircraft arrived on Thursday to try to control the spread of the blazes.

In Victoria, at least 43 fires are burning out of control. As many as 1,000 fires have started this week across the state. Emergency warning and evacuation orders have been issued to the residents of 13 towns near the Grampians National Park in the state's west, where blazes have burgeoned from 1,500 hectares to over 21,000 hectares. One death has already been reported in the area. There are concerns that the town of Halls Gap could be engulfed as wind direction changes push a wall of fire directly into the small tourist community.

Twenty fires are being fought in Gippsland, to the east of Melbourne, with warnings they could engulf as much as 500,000 hectares of bushland. Other fires continue to burn across 40,000 hectares in the Mallee region, which encompasses north-western Victoria and north-eastern South Australia. Ten fire fighters have been hospitalised due to heat exhaustion, according to the State Control Centre.

The fires in both states are expected to worsen this evening as winds pick up ahead of an anticipated cool change over the weekend. Authorities in Victoria described today's conditions as the most dangerous since "Black Saturday"—February 7, 2009—when fires killed or injured 587 people and destroyed over 2,000 homes.

Fire services are already stretched to the limit by the number and geographic spread of the fires, heightening the dangers of a catastrophe. The Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) and South Australian CFS rely almost entirely on volunteer fire fighters. A report obtained by the *Adelaide Advertiser* in 2012 showed an almost 17 percent fall in the number of CFS volunteers over the previous decade.

More deadly than the bush fires is the heat itself. South Australia has suffered temperatures over 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) for five consecutive days, the third worst heat wave on record. The state capital Adelaide was declared the "hottest city on earth" yesterday. The temperature reached 37.4°C by 9 a.m. and peaked at 44.2°C. In Roseworthy, a township to the city's north, it reached 46.4°C.

To date, over 200 people, mainly elderly, children and outdoor workers, had been admitted to hospital with heat-triggered conditions. Ambulance services have responded to 20 percent more calls for assistance than usual this week. Health chief public officer Dr Stephen Christley told the *Adelaide Advertiser*: "There is an inevitability that with some people, particularly the frail, this heat will have contributed to the fact they will die during this period." During the 2009 heat wave, 64 deaths in South Australia were directly attributed to the weather.

© World Socialist Web Site

Temperatures across Victoria have exceeded 40°C since Tuesday. The state capital Melbourne is enduring its longest run of days over 40°C since 1908. The temperature reached 43.9°C yesterday—the highest since Black Saturday. Over the past 24 hours, 51 cardiac arrests have been treated. Since Tuesday, paramedics have treated hundreds of instances of heat exhaustion. Heat-related calls for advice to the "Nurse on Call" hotline are running at four times the rate of last January.

For the first time, play was suspended for part of yesterday at the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne. Croatian player Ivan Dodig told journalists on Wednesday: "I was thinking I could maybe even die here. It's not acceptable to play in these conditions." Over 1,000 fans have been treated for heat exposure during the event.

Today, train services have been cancelled or delayed across Melbourne, with the rail authority appealing to people to leave the city before the peak period in the late afternoon. Surface temperatures, on roads and pavements, are being recorded at over 80°C (176 degrees Fahrenheit).

At least 24 deaths this week in Victoria, mainly elderly people who suffered heart attacks, have been attributed to the heat. During the heat wave week in February 2009, 374 deaths were attributed to the weather conditions in the state—more double the 173 lives lost in the bush fires.

As well as the elderly, sections of the working class who work outdoors or in enclosed, non-air conditioned environments are particularly at risk. The *Adelaide Advertiser* reported on the case of electrician Bruce Waldron, whose personal thermometer recorded 71°C (160 degrees Fahrenheit) inside the attic where he was doing wiring work this week. According to a government report last July, there will be more than 2,000 heat-related fatalities in 2050, compared with about 500 recorded in 2011.

The health dangers are being compounded by electricity blackouts in residential suburbs that deprive households of air conditioners. The Australian Energy Market Operator indicated that up to 100,000 homes and businesses may be affected by power outages on the national grid. Already thousands of drop outs have taken place throughout the week, including to 19,000 people in Victoria. State power demand has exceeded 10,000 megawatts for the past three days, compared with the average January weekday usage of 6,600 megawatts.

The heat wave is part of a clear trend. 2013 was the hottest year ever recorded on the Australian continent. Nine of 10 warmest recorded years have occurred since 2001. The climatic conditions have led to the fire season being extended to range from October until March in Australia's southeast.

On Wednesday, the Australian Climate Council issued an interim report of a study that it will release in February. Like other reports, it drew a connection between global carbon emissions, worldwide temperature increases and the number and intensity of heat waves in Australia. It noted that Australia's average temperature has risen by 0.9 percent since 1910, in line with the global trend. Heat records are being broken at three times the rate of cold records, and the number of hot days in Australia has "more than doubled" since 1950.

One of the report's authors, Professor Will Steffen, told Australian ABC Radio: "The current conditions that Australians are experiencing are becoming more common." His co-author, Dr Sarah Perkins, said the extreme heat conditions should be considered the "new normal" for the Australian continent. Heat waves have been experienced this month across the southern hemisphere, from Africa to South America.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site