

Australian bushfires underline impact of global climate warming

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Firefighters in the state of South Australia are engaged in an ongoing battle to contain fires that have spread through the Adelaide hills, northeast of the state capital, since Friday.

As of this writing, the blazes had torn through more than 12,000 hectares of land in the region, and destroyed or badly damaged 26 homes. This figure is expected to increase, as teams are only now being sent into burnt-out areas. Of the 59 areas being assessed, just 20 had been inspected yesterday. There are more than 1,100 properties in the fire-affected region.

Twenty-nine people have been hospitalised already, including one person who suffered a serious asthma attack. So far, there have been no reported fatalities.

The number of destroyed properties is greater than in any fire in South Australia since the 1983 “Ash Wednesday” disaster, which left 75 people dead. The state’s Country Fire Service (CFS) has advised that the next 48 hours will be critical in bringing the blaze under control, due to temperatures of up to 38 degrees Celsius (100.4 Fahrenheit) today and Wednesday.

CFS chief officer Greg Nettleton warned of catastrophic conditions on Wednesday. “The winds will swing around to the north. At the moment I think they’re predicting somewhere like about 35 kilometers per hour,” he said. “That’s enough given the dryness of the country for the fire to spread, so our number one priority is to secure the outer perimeter of that large fire so it doesn’t impact on further communities.”

About 375 firefighters, including from the neighbouring states of New South Wales and Victoria, are involved in the effort, down from over 700 yesterday. The wildfires stretch along a 240-kilometer perimeter. CFS state coordinator Brenton Eden said inaccessible fires in the south to southwestern corner of the blaze were most concerning. “We just do not want

this fire to go any further south. It then starts to impact on a whole new scenario,” he told the media.

In Victoria, authorities last night downgraded the fire danger at Rocklands in the state’s west to “watch and act.” An emergency warning was last night issued for residents in Mockinya, Nurrabiel, Telangatuk and Toolondon. Other fires are still burning in Kaiva, Edenhope, Goroke and Moyton, though these are reportedly not currently threatening any communities. Firefighters had been struggling against more than 600 separate blazes that sprang up from Friday, including one that wiped out 5,000 hectares and two homes in Moyston. A fire in the urban centre of Hastings on Saturday also damaged six homes.

The bushfires underscore the dangerous impact of climate warming in Australia and internationally. For more than 20 years, climate scientists and fire experts have warned that bushfires in Australia would occur with increasing regularity and intensity as a result of climate change, which not only contributes to higher temperatures but exacerbates droughts, leading to greater amounts of dry fire fuel.

Life-threatening wildfires in Australia have become a new “normal,” occurring on an annual basis during the fire seasons from November to April. The latest bushfires follow the 2009 “Black Saturday” disaster in Victoria, in which 173 people died, and the 2005 Eyre Peninsula bushfire in South Australia, which killed nine.

Yet, successive state and federal governments, both Liberal and Labor, have either made cuts to firefighting services and precautions or refused to provide any substantial increases in funding to deal with the heightened dangers. In Victoria, a leaked Country Fire Authority (CFA) document in November revealed that the organisation was in the process of shedding 10

percent of its workforce, or 164 staff, including in “fire and emergency management,” business services and volunteer training.

Fire services, starved of resources, remain overwhelmingly reliant on the work of volunteers. In South Australia, the CFS employs just 782 professional firefighters, compared with more than 11,000 volunteer firefighters.

According to the Bureau of Meteorology’s annual climate statement, published today, 2014 was the third warmest year in Australia since records began in 1910, with a national mean of 0.91 degrees Celsius above the average. Seven of the country’s ten warmest years on record have come since 2002.

Dr Sarah Perkins, a research fellow at the University of New South Wales’ Climate Change Research Centre, told the *Guardian Australia*: “People generally associate heat waves with summer, but we’re starting to see extreme events occur in autumn and spring, such as the prolonged heat we had in Sydney this past autumn. We’ve had an early start to the bushfire season and some of the areas of vegetation are like a tinderbox. Heat isn’t the only contributor to bushfire risk, but when you have high heat and low moisture, that’s a lethal combination for fire.”

Professor David Karoly, a climate scientist at the University of Melbourne, told the newspaper: “Unless there are rapid, substantial and sustained reductions of greenhouse gas emissions in Australia and globally, Australia will experience more heatwaves and bushfires as in 2014.”

A report studying the impact of climate change on the danger of fires in South Australia, published by the Climate Council last November, noted that heatwaves in the state were increasing in frequency, intensity and duration. In Adelaide, the state capital, average heatwave intensity increased by 2.5 degrees Celsius from 1950 to 2011. At the same time, the report noted that since the mid-1990s, southeastern Australia had experienced a 15 percent decline in autumn and early winter rainfall in April and May.

The report stated: “It is very likely that an increased incidence of drought in the southeast—coupled with consecutive hot and dry days—will in turn result in longer fire seasons and an ever larger number of days of extreme fire danger in coming decades.” The report stated that across Australia, professional firefighter

numbers would need to be raised by 20 percent, or 2,300 by 2020, just to keep pace with population growth. To cover the rising danger of fires due to global warming, it called for a further 1,200 firefighters.

Successive climate change summits, including the latest United Nations gathering in Peru, have been incapable of reaching any agreement on reducing carbon emissions. Instead, policies are determined by geo-political rivalries, austerity measures and the profit interests of the corporate and financial elites.

In Australia, the refusal of all the major political parties to increase the resources and funding to prevent or respond to bushfires makes it inevitable that tragedies will continue to occur.



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