Australian bushfires tragically confirm Climate Council warnings

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The past two months have seen an early and terrible start to Australia's annual bushfire season. Record temperatures have sparked fires in several Australian states, destroying homes and hundreds of thousands of hectares of farmland, and taking the lives of seven people.

Australia's traditional summer fire season is from December to February. In October, however, the temperature hit 35 degrees centigrade in Victoria, the highest on record for October, generating 200 fires across the state in the first week of the month. Tasmania recorded three days of total fire bans in the first half of the month.

Last week, fires killed four people and destroyed over 300,000 hectares near Esperance, Western Australia. This week, two people died in South Australia and another in New South Wales, when major fires hit those states. The South Australian fire burnt along a 200-kilometre front, north of the state capital Adelaide, incinerating 85,000 hectares, destroying or damaging over 80 homes and cutting power to over 22,000 properties.

The events confirm the warnings in a recent Climate Council of Australia report indicating that hot, dry weather conducive to bushfires is extending beyond the traditional fire-danger summer months and into spring and autumn.

The Burning Issue—Climate Change and the Australian Bushfire Threat by Leslie Hughes and Jacqui Fenwick draws connections between climate change and extended periods in which bushfires are likely in Australia and other parts of the world, especially North America.

During the past 18 months alone, Australia has experienced a significant number of major bushfires. During 2014 and the 2014–2015 fire seasons 18 bushfire events were declared national disasters. Large parts of southeast Australia and Western Australia will face extreme fire potential during the 2015–2016 season.

Many areas have had below average rainfall over successive years, causing reduced soil-moisture levels and dry vegetation. The currently strengthening El Niño weather pattern across the equatorial Pacific Ocean will intensify the already hot and dry conditions in Australia. By September, El Niño conditions in the Pacific reached levels not seen since the severe 1997–1998 event.

According to several climate data agencies, 2014 was the hottest year ever recorded worldwide, despite no El Niño event occurring. It was also the 38th consecutive year that annual global temperatures were above average.

World Meteorological Organisation secretary-general Michel Jarraud told the media this week that "2015 is likely to be the hottest year on record, with ocean surface temperatures at the highest level since measurements began." Jarraud added: "This is all bad news for the planet."

The Climate Change report warns that annual fire seasons will be extended as a result of increases in the frequency and duration of fire weather conditions. In fact, the fire weather season globally lengthened by almost 19 percent between 1979 and 2013, with this trend expected to continue. In parts of the United States, the bushfire season is now more than a month longer than it was 35 years ago.

The lengthening of the fire season in both hemispheres will see an overlapping of the seasons, potentially decreasing the capacity of fire-fighting organisations to share resources and presenting new and more life-threatening challenges.

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Fire-fighting agencies have relied on shared resources, including specialised helicopters and planes and firefighting personnel, over the past decade. The extreme 2015 bushfire season in the US pushed domestic firefighters to capacity and 72 Australian and New Zealand firefighters were deployed there in August and September. Another 104 were sent to Canada to assist firefighting operations there. In 2007, 100 Americans, 32 Canadians and 116 New Zealand personnel assisted in Australian bushfire fighting. International reinforcements, including 73 from the US, were deployed following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfire disaster in Victoria.

The Climate Council report notes that in July this year, Victorian and Californian emergency services signed a partnership agreement to share information, skills and services, particularly for firefighting. Victoria's Emergency Services Minister Jane Garrett and Emergency Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley also signed an agreement with the US federal Homeland Security department for a partnership on information sharing and decision-making capabilities.

The Climate Council report warns that with longer and more intense bushfire seasons, "firefighting services will be less able to rely on help from interstate and across the world as fires occur simultaneously."

The report calls for a doubling of the number of firefighters in Australia by 2030, but federal and state governments, Liberal and Labor alike, are imposing cost-cutting in this and every other area of social need. Emergency services are being reduced even as residential areas expand into new high-risk fire locations. People are moving into outlying areas that lack adequate infrastructure and emergency services because of the high cost of urban housing.

In Victoria, despite the loss of 173 lives in the 2009 Black Saturday fires and subsequent recommendations from the state's Bushfire Royal Commission, only four purpose-built community fire refuges have been erected. Hundreds are needed. Just 190 kilometres of high-voltage power lines have been buried or otherwise improved out of 25,450 kilometres of dangerous lines identified in the Powerline Bushfire Safety Program priority area.

Climate Council CEO Amanda McKenzie commented: "I don't know any [state] government that has a plan for how they are going to manage the need for more firefighters in the future."

She added: "The tragedies in Esperance show we need to make sure our emergency services and communities are prepared... We must join the rest of the world in meaningful action to bring climate change under control. The Paris climate conference provides an ideal opportunity for our country to set stronger emissions reduction targets."

Next week's Paris conference, however, will do nothing to prevent the escalating climate change crisis. The failure of previous meetings to reach any agreement was the product of conflicting national and corporate interests that show no sign of being resolved.

Even before the Paris conference convened, Washington pre-empted suggestions of any binding treaty. Each nation will develop only "voluntary" plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

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