Australia: Over 100 houses destroyed in Victorian bushfires

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High temperatures, an ongoing drought and other adverse weather conditions caused by an El Niño weather pattern in the Pacific Ocean have sparked major bushfires in southern-eastern Australia in recent weeks.

The worst fires erupted in the state of Victoria in the Otway Ranges region, where heavy eucalypt forests adjoin the coastline, making popular seaside towns along the Great Ocean Road highly susceptible.

Nightmare conditions, including temperatures over 40 degrees centigrade, faced firefighters on Christmas Day with 116 homes destroyed in two small coastal communities—98 houses at Wye River and 18 at Separation Creek. Authorities permitted residents from the devastated communities to view the damage the next day but they were not allowed to stay.

Within days high temperatures saw the return of the fire threat, with the blaze continuing to burn some 2,295 hectares of inaccessible bushland along a 39-kilometre front.

On New Year's Eve residents and holidaymakers along the ocean coastal strip were advised by fire-fighting authorities to evacuate in a "Leave early and live" campaign in case hot summer winds pushed the still burning fire back towards other seaside communities. Part of the iconic Great Ocean Road remains closed, due to concerns about the danger of rock falls from the steep, but now denuded, hillsides.

More than 600 firefighters, many of them volunteers, battled the blaze, with another 20 specialist firefighters due to arrive this week from New Zealand to assist in creating firebreaks and containing the fire. There were also 69 vehicles with water tanks, 11 fire-tankers, bulldozers and 60 aircraft in one of the largest aerial fire fighting operations in the state's history.

While the damage bill from the Christmas Day losses is estimated to be around $38 million, the state government has provided just $32,000 in compensation for primary homes in the area, and none for holiday houses.

There was the usual official outpouring of sympathy for the fire victims from the political elite.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull visited the devastated township of Wye River between Christmas and the New Year and praised the efforts of residents and firefighters. Victorian Labor state premier Daniel Andrews travelled to the area on New Year's Eve offering similar platitudes.

Federal and state politicians—Liberal and Labor alike—are adept at shedding crocodile tears and utilising the photo opportunities at these disasters to try and deflect from their continual underfunding of fire and emergency services, as part of wider budget cuts (see: "Australian fire-fighting budget cuts place lives at risk "). In 2014 , the Victorian government slashed 164 full-time jobs from the Country Fire Authority (CFA).

While Australia is one of the most bush-fire prone countries in the world, its fire-fighting services rely heavily on thousands of unpaid volunteers. Currently there are just over 13,000 full-time fire fighters in Australia, concentrated in the cities, with more than 219,000 unpaid volunteers, drawn from local rural communities. Fire-fighting authorities estimate that fire services need to be doubled by 2030, yet neither federal nor state governments are prepared to provide the necessary funding.

Although the immediate danger has passed, the Otway Ranges fire may not be extinguished for weeks because of inaccessible terrain, even with the support of fire-fighting aircraft. A combination of more hot weather and high winds could see the entrenched blaze threaten adjoining towns and communities again.

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About 20 bushfires were sparked by lightning strikes in Gippsland in Victoria's east on Friday. Rain and colder weather assisted fire fighters the next day. Gippsland regional controller Michael Owen warned: "We're just having a bit of a respite and it will come back with a vengeance. The things we've seen in the west of the state can happen in Gippsland."

While Australia's traditional summer fire season is from December to February, six people have been killed and thousands of hectares of property and hundreds of homes were destroyed by bush fires in Australia during October and November.

Victoria, in fact, has suffered more than 2,500 bushfires, of varying sizes, since October resulting in 139 houses, several vehicles and other assets destroyed. The hottest months, when the most damaging bushfires usually occur are still to come.

CFA chief officer Joe Buffone told the media that Victorian grasslands and forests were much drier than they usually are at this time of the year. "We're pretty much between five and six weeks ahead of what the drying pattern would be for grasslands … obviously in the forests there's been underlying moisture deficit," he said.

"If you think about the fires in the Otways, they are normally wet forests. If you get a fast-moving grass fire that then moves into the forest, that becomes a significant ongoing fire for us."

December broke high temperature records across large parts of south-eastern Australia and El Niño conditions mean there are far greater chances of bushfires this summer. According to US space agency NASA and meteorologists, extreme weather events around the world in the last month are the result of the current El Niño that could be comparable to the most severe such event which occurred in 1997–98.

According to NASA, this has produced flooding in South America, a record breaking hurricane season in the eastern tropical Pacific and hotter and drier conditions in Australia, particularly across the south and inland areas in the east of the continent. Nine of the 10 driest winter and spring periods on record for eastern Australia occurred during El Niño years.

Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre CEO Dr Richard Thornton told Fairfax Media that El Niño seasons created dangerous bushfire conditions. He also warned that increasing numbers of people were living in fire danger zones in Victoria. "We're living closer to the bush—there are more people in Victoria now than there were 20 years ago, so the chance of fire intersecting with a community is much higher just on population figures," he said.

As well as in densely-forested areas, such as Victoria's Otways Ranges, there are potential bushfire dangers in newly-developed locations on urban perimeters around Melbourne and in regional centres.

Inflated and escalating housing costs in Australian cities and towns has resulted in the real estate and property industries in the drive for quick profits pushing into forested and grassland areas that are inherently fire-prone. Ad hoc development of new communities and the refusal of state and federal government to provide adequate fire-fighting and emergency services are exposing hundreds of families to serious risk.

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