

Two dead, scores of homes destroyed in Western Australian bushfire

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A massive bushfire in Western Australia over the past week has left two dead, destroyed at least 143 properties and ruined an entire town. The fire has burnt more than 72,000 hectares in the state's southwest, about 120 kilometres south of Perth, the state capital.

The blaze follows a series of bushfires around the country, including three in the Esperance region, also in southern Western Australia, last November, that claimed four lives and burnt 300,000 hectares.

The latest fire reportedly began last Wednesday morning as a result of lightning strikes, and spread rapidly. Officials said on Sunday that the fire was "contained," but it may be months before it is entirely extinguished.

Amid what is already a severe and prolonged bushfire season, questions have been raised about the preparation and response of authorities to the disaster. Residents of Yarloop, a timber mill-town with a population of around 500, said they were given virtually no warning before the fire engulfed the area, and the town was left without water.

The fire struck Yarloop at around 8pm on Thursday. Residents reported widespread panic and fear as strong winds created a series of "fireballs" that swept through the town. Many people only learned of the imminent danger when told by friends, or volunteer firefighters.

The blaze is believed to have destroyed some 128 homes in the town. A nearby caravan park was decimated, while the post office, workshops, factories, historic buildings, the fire station and parts of the local school were also destroyed. Two elderly residents perished in the blaze and four firefighters suffered burns.

It was revealed yesterday that Yarloop was only explicitly named in an emergency alert by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services 25

minutes before the blaze hit the town. A post by the Yarloop Volunteer Bushfire Brigade's Facebook page commented: "We were left by the hierarchy to defend our town on our [own], unfortunately we lost."

Residents have expressed anger that in the hours preceding the fire, the town's water supply apparently failed.

One resident, Barry Goodwill, whose comments were quoted in the *Mandurah Coastal Times*, said: "We were sacrificed—we didn't have a hope in hell ... I went to put sprinklers on my roof, but the water went out. This was at about 10am or 11am on Thursday—several hours before the fire came."

Another resident wrote to the state's emergency services minister last year about faulty water hydrants in the town. While they were serviced, some did not work during the fire.

Authorities have responded contemptuously to the mounting anger of the town's residents. They defended the warning system and claimed that residents should have known that rural water supplies, which are not connected to the main metropolitan water systems, often fail in the event of a fire.

Western Australian Fire Commissioner Wayne Gregson declared on Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio yesterday morning: "There'll be no shortage of armchair generals to tell you what you should have, could have or might have done." He blamed residents, saying: "You cannot be sitting at home waiting to get a text before you take responsibility for your own safety."

His comments, and others from the state Liberal government's emergency services minister, Joe Francis, are a warning that any official investigation into the blaze will be a whitewash to absolve authorities of responsibility for the disaster.

The fire has created a mounting social crisis, with hundreds left homeless. In addition to Yarloop, nearby towns such as Waroona, Harvey and Preston Beach were affected by the blaze, with residents evacuated.

Around 1,000 homes in the area are reportedly still without power. According to insurance companies, the blaze has resulted in damage worth at least \$60 million. A number of vineyards have been destroyed, along with sections of dairy farms.

As the disaster was unfolding, a report was released into the official response to major bushfires in Western Australia in January and February 2015. It concluded that residents and firefighters had been placed at risk by a lack of resources and poor coordination.

The report found that during the Northcliffe and Boddington fires, which destroyed some 150,000 hectares of land, the state's Incident Management Teams suffered from inadequate resources. Clashes between government departments, insufficient "community engagement" and poor management of appliance and crews also hampered the response.

Reports into earlier fires have found that the Western Australian Fire and Emergency Service Authority is not equipped to tackle large blazes on multiple fronts.

A United Fire Fighters Union submission on fires that destroyed 71 homes in the Perth Hills at the beginning of 2011 pointed out that many firefighting personnel were volunteers, while professional firefighters were denied overtime pay. The city reportedly ran out of fire engines due to the number of separate fires, while crews lacked essential supplies.

An initial inquiry in August 2011, headed by former Australian Federal Police chief Mick Keelty, focused on education and administrative reforms, evading the questions of funding, personnel numbers and equipment. Nevertheless, most of its limited proposals were not even implemented before the start of the 2011-2012 bushfire season.

In November 2011, a blaze swept through Margaret River, in the state's south, destroying 37 homes. State authorities had been conducting a controlled burn, despite high temperatures and heavy winds, that skipped containment lines. A scathing report into that fire pointed to insufficient resources, poor communication between agencies and other issues that had been identified by previous bushfire inquiries.

In the 2012-2013 financial year, the state government

froze the hiring process for vacant positions in the Fire and Emergency Service Authority, which was directed to reduce its operating costs by almost \$400,000. Deadly fires again broke out in the Perth Hills at the beginning of 2014, killing one person and destroying over 50 homes.

Amid a collapse in government revenues, resulting from the end of the mining boom, and calls for deeper cuts to social services, further tragedies are inevitable.

The fire risk is being exacerbated by the effects of global climate change, which has resulted in periods of long, hot weather. The state's southwest has undergone long-term drying trends, with winter and autumn rainfall dropping by around 20 percent since 1970. The state had its second-hottest year on record in 2015, experiencing temperatures almost one degree Celsius above average.

Australia's Climate Council, which was stripped of federal government funding in 2013, warned at the beginning of 2015: "Longer, hotter and more intense heatwaves, and more frequent and severe droughts, are driving up the likelihood of very high bushfire risk, particularly in the southwest and southeast of Australia." It stated that by 2030, the number of professional firefighters in Western Australia would need to be doubled to match the increasing risk.



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