Southeast Australian heatwaves signal a horror fire season

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In stark contrast to freezing conditions in the northern hemisphere, southeastern Australia started the year with record-breaking heatwaves that foreshadow a severe summer fire season over the next two or three months.

On January 6, Penrith, a western suburb of Sydney, experienced 47.3 degrees Celsius or 117 degrees Fahrenheit, making it the hottest place on the planet for that day—just below the hottest temperature ever recorded in Sydney.

The scorching conditions extended across the southeastern corner, where the great majority of the Australian population live. The states of South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) all experienced temperatures over 40 degrees C. That heatwave was followed by another on January 18–19 with similar temperatures,

Many areas were subject to power outages, including on the NSW Central Coast, where more than 4,000 properties were affected. Approximately 3,000 properties were cut off in Sydney, along with thousands of homes in Melbourne. As in other heatwaves, there is likely to have been a spike in deaths, with the elderly, infirm and young children the worst affected.

Fire is an ever-present danger as southeastern Australia is one of the most bushfire prone areas of the world. High temperatures, especially when accompanied with strong winds, create the perfect conditions for fire storms fuelled by highly-flammable eucalyptus vegetation.

On January 6, several homes were destroyed by fires that swept through 12,100 hectares of scrub and farmland at Sherwood in South Australia's southeast. In Victoria, 139 fires broke out across the state, including in Carrum Downs on the outskirts of Melbourne. One of the worst fires was fanned by 90 km/hr winds at Glenormiston in the state's west. Beginning on January 19, a bushfire has burned over 59,000 hectares (about 146,000 acres) of the Pilliga State Forest in northwestern NSW. Fire crews from across the state continue to battle the blaze.

These fires are a warning of the dangers ahead as high temperatures continue to dry out vegetation. Moreover, concerns are being raised that such heatwaves are becoming the new norm as a result of global warming and climate change.

The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) climate statement for 2017 reported that Australia experienced the third-warmest year on record, and the warmest non-El Niño year on record. El Niño, a broad weather pattern associated with shifts in ocean currents and atmosphere conditions over the Pacific, is usually accompanied by rising temperatures in Australia.

According to the BOM, seven of Australia's 10 warmest years have occurred since 2005. The annual mean temperature has increased by approximately 1.1°C since 1910, mostly since 1950. The bureau concluded that the higher temperatures are due to "anthropogenic climate change"—that is, the impact of human activity on weather patterns.

The rise in temperatures has been accompanied by lower than average rainfalls, leading to a long-term drying out of forest environments, making them even more flammable.

The BOM's head of climate monitoring, Dr. Karl Braganza, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "We have seen that warming across the [Australian] land surface temperatures and in the ocean surrounding Australia, so they have both warmed by a similar amount and that's consistent with global warming as well … odds [now] favour warmer-than-average temperatures more often than in the past."

Climate change deniers have pointed to the record

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low temperatures in the northern hemisphere to dismiss global warming and/or the role of human activity. US President Donald Trump tweeted sarcastically in December: “In the East, it could be the COLDEST New Year’s Eve on record … Perhaps we could use a little bit of that good old Global Warming …”

However, the disparity between the northern hemisphere freeze and the Australian heatwave does not contradict global warming, as average temperatures have risen across the planet. Higher mean temperatures do not have a uniform impact across the globe but disrupt longstanding weather patterns producing new extremes—such as more frequent, destructive hurricanes and cyclones, as well as the northern deep freeze.

Climate Council of Australia councillor Will Steffen explained in the *Sydney Morning Herald:* “The climate disruption we are increasingly experiencing is not natural. It is caused by the heat-trapping gases we humans are pouring into the atmosphere primarily by the burning of coal, oil and gas. This enormous increase in energy in the atmosphere is disrupting normal circulation patterns.”

In Australia, successive governments, Labor and Coalition, have done nothing to cut greenhouse gases. Last year’s emissions were the highest on record, making this the third consecutive year of increases.

The BOM national bushfire outlook released last November warned that heavily-populated areas, including around Sydney, Melbourne and Hobart, face an above-average fire risk. The bureau also announced the formation of a weak La Niña pattern—the counterpart of an El Niño—suggesting it will be warm and dry for the next three months.

At a meeting of Australian fire chiefs last September, NSW fire commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said “the vegetation moisture levels today are considerably drier and are showing a worse situation than they were leading into the 2013 fire season.”

In 2013, fires swept across southern Australia. It was considered the worst fire season since 2009, when the infamous “Black Saturday” occurred on February 7. The Black Saturday fires in Victoria, which were the most catastrophic in recorded history, killed 173 people, including 23 children, and incinerated 300,000 hectares and 2,100 homes.

The tragedy led to a royal commission that exposed major failures by emergency services officials, lack of fire warnings, the absence of fire refuges or an evacuation policy, and poor maintenance of high-voltage power lines that sparked many of the fires.

Ultimately, however, the royal commission was a whitewash. It failed to indict the state Labor government’s “stay or go” policy, which was to blame for most of the deaths. The policy shifted the responsibility for deciding whether to remain or flee onto individuals in bushfire-prone areas and relied entirely on emergency alerts that failed to occur.

Two key recommendations were the burying or bundling of high-voltage power lines and a government buy-back scheme of homes in the most vulnerable areas. Both proposals were rejected by Labor Premier John Brumby as too expensive.

Although the “stay or go” policy was abandoned, there are still only *five* refuges available across Victoria. Lines have been buried underground on a very limited basis. The Victorian Powerline Replacement Fund has a $200 million budget, a tiny fraction of the $7.5 billion required.

The danger of fire disasters has worsened as more workers have been forced to live in semi-rural areas due to the precipitous rise in urban housing costs. In 2011, what is known as the peri-urban population of Melbourne reached 1.36 million and was expected to increase by 400,000 by 2021. A similar pattern is reflected on the fringes of all Australian major cities, where these peri-urban communities are ill equipped to cope with extreme fire conditions.

Rising temperatures, unpredictable weather patterns, poor urban planning, failure to implement preventative measures, inadequately equipped fire-fighting services and the lack of evacuation shelters are all combining to create the conditions for new fire tragedies.

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