

Severe drought hits large regions of Australia

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Last month the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) declared the entire state in drought or drought-affected. The prolonged dry period is enhancing bushfire risk considerably, and will prolong the fire season to an unprecedented extent. Government indifference has exacerbated the plight of many farmers and rural communities that are reeling under the dry conditions.

The DPI announcement stated that the entire state of NSW, consisting of 810 thousand square kilometres, is suffering the drought, which extends into parts of Queensland, South Australia and Victoria. NSW is the worst affected, with outback communities such as Coonabarabran, Broken Hill, Orange and Dubbo experiencing the driest 18-month period since 1900, when records began.

NSW authorities estimate that 23 percent of the state is experiencing “intense drought,” 38.2 percent is in “drought” and 38.7 percent is drought-affected. Last month some districts had no rain at all, or as little as 10 millimetres, following a dry autumnal season and the failure of winter rains.

Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) meteorologist Jane Golding said that every part of NSW usually received rain through the winter months of June, July and August. However, she added, “this year we haven’t really seen either of those, and last year as well we didn’t really see too much of either of those rain bearing systems making their way into NSW. It is unusually dry and also unusually warm, which exacerbates the problems, so the warm temperatures dry out the soils even more.”

The impact in rural areas is particularly severe, with some communities in danger of completely running out of water.

Ian Woodcock, the mayor of Walgett Shire in the far north of NSW, said: “This area has always been good cropping country... But right now it’s the driest it’s ever been. Roads are like talcum powder.”

Farmers are being forced to reduce their stocking of sheep and cattle, as local fodder supplies are drying up

and interstate carted fodder is becoming prohibitively expensive.

“I’d say it’s (fodder) as close to exhausted as I ever want to see,” said the managing director of Feed Central, Tim Ford. He also said that feed prices had “skyrocketed” and would be “all but spent” in the next few weeks.

Farmers cannot afford to pay workers, causing severe hardship in rural towns.

“The farmers are struggling. But their workers are also struggling. If the farms aren’t getting crops in and off, they’re not having the money to pay their workers,” school principal Vivienne Fouracre from Bellata in north central NSW, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

The severe conditions facing farmers will have a devastating impact on mental health. A study *Drought-related stress among farmers: findings from the Australian Rural Health Study*, published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* in July, analysed data during 2007 to 2013, including the Millennium Drought of 1997 to 2010. Considered the worst in recorded history, this drought was particularly severe in the country’s south east and south west, where most of the population lives.

The study stated that an “association between suicide in rural areas and drought, socio-economic hardship, and financial strain among farmers have been reported.”

“Young people in rural communities are a vulnerable group with regard to mental health. It has been reported that unemployed young people in rural and remote NSW were 12 times as likely to experience distress as employed people of the same age,” it reported.

Margo Wollaston, the wife of a cattle farmer from Condobolin said: “I find droughts a little bit like cancer. It sort of eats away at you, and it gets drier and drier and more severe and more severe, and impacting on your life a lot worse. I do try to keep the house and the garden clean and green because that keeps your head in the right space at night time.”

In Sydney, the NSW state capital, and home to 4

million, water catchments have water levels already lower than during the millennial drought. The situation is likely to worsen, as the Bureau of Meteorology forecasts continued dry conditions for the next three months.

The initial response of the NSW Liberal government was to downplay the seriousness of the drought. It issued drought maps in July, showing severely affected areas as “in drought onset” and only modified the maps after angry criticism from farmers on drought ravished properties.

At the end of July, the NSW government announced an extra \$500 million, doubling the drought relief package, which includes freight subsidies for fodder. Such subsidies, however, usually increase the costs of both freight and fodder. Government taxes are being waived and a \$150 million NSW’s Farm Innovation Fund will be used to help farmers become more “drought efficient.” Such subsidies do little for struggling farmers who are spending increasing amounts trying to keep their stock alive.

The former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull toured drought areas in August, promising to fast track \$1 billion in low interest loans over the next four years. However, this included only \$250 million of new money. Such loans will drive farmers further into debt and towards bankruptcy.

Limited additional payments were made available through the Farm Household Allowance—the equivalent of an unemployment allowance. According to the ABC, the government pledged a further \$12,000 for couples, after the outcry from farmers at the pitiful amounts available.

Once again, a military figure has been brought in to run the civilian disaster relief. The government appointed Major General Stephen Day, who was involved in operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as national drought coordinator.

On August 27, new Prime Minister Scott Morrison toured drought-ravaged south west Queensland, just days after he was installed in an inner party coup. The trip was a cynical bid to raise his political profile and shore up support for the government.

The increasingly dry conditions and relatively high temperatures have exacerbated the risk of bushfires, even though winter has just ended. At the end of July, there were 525 bushfires burning across Australia, forcing authorities to bring forward the start of the bushfire season to the beginning of August instead of October.

“We’ve had next to no rain in some parts of the state for quite a long time. It means we could be in for a very,

very bad summer,” a spokesperson for the NSW Rural Fire Service, James Morris, said.

Australia is an extremely dry continent and has been historically prone to drought. Complex factors causing drought, such as El Niño and the Indian Ocean Dipole, involve warming ocean temperatures, that indicate reduced rainfall in Australia. Climate scientists are forecasting they are moving in the spring towards a drying pattern.

A report *Climate Change and Drought*, published by the Climate Council in June, highlighted the relationship of global warming to drought conditions. It stated that “since the 1970s late autumn and early winter rainfall has decreased by 15 percent in southeast Australia, and Western Australia’s southwest has experienced a 15 percent decline in cool season rainfall.”

The report predicts that rainfall will reduce considerably and temperatures will increase if “greenhouse gas emissions are not cut deeply and rapidly.”

Successive governments, Labour and Liberal, have done nothing to cut greenhouse gases. Over the past three years, carbon emissions have increased, with 2017 reaching a new record high.

The lack of any significant steps towards reducing emissions, like the failure to provide adequate support for drought affected communities, is the product of capitalism, in which profit is the overriding priority, rather than pressing social needs.



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