

Thousands forced to flee “catastrophic” fire event in Australia

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Unprecedented weather conditions—a combination of record-breaking temperatures, “tornado-like” winds and unusually low humidity—fanned huge fires that have threatened entire townships in coastal central Queensland this week.

Already, at least 8,000 people have been forced to evacuate in the face of the northern Australian state’s first-ever “catastrophic” fire emergency. No one has yet been reported killed, but an unknown number of homes have been destroyed.

Flames as high as 20 metres have suddenly loomed over homes, giving residents just minutes to flee. Comparisons have been drawn with recent devastating bush fires in Western Australia and this month’s infernos in California.

A firefighting commander, Rural Fire Services Central Region manager Brian Smith said: “This is something we don’t want to overstate, but they’re comparing this to the conditions in the Waroona fires in Western Australia, which completely wiped out a town a few years ago, and also to the recent California fires.”

Nearly 200 fires, with fronts up to 50 kilometres wide, burnt thousands of hectares on Wednesday, causing authorities to warn of “catastrophic fire risks” from central Queensland north to the tropical city of Townsville.

Around 100 fires were still burning across the state yesterday, and that number could rise again, with five more days of heatwave predicted. More than 40 schools remained closed and the main north-south highway was cut for a period.

Hundreds of firefighters have been flown in from interstate to help relieve their exhausted and overstretched Queensland counterparts. Queensland Fire and Emergency Services inspector Andrew Sturgeous said the state had never seen fires like this before.

In the region around the central Queensland city of Rockhampton, the official fire danger rating reached 135 on Wednesday, well above the “catastrophic” level of 100. That rating, the highest possible, indicates fires of such severity that no house can survive, no matter how well constructed.

Residents were shocked and often caught unawares. About 50 people at Campwin Beach, south of Mackay, were forced to leave their homes at 2 a.m. on Thursday. Vicky Crichton told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation she was woken by authorities telling her to evacuate immediately. “It was so quick ... I just opened the door and it was like opening the door to hell.”

In another typical account, Lindsay Barram, 70, told AAP that the people of the small township of Mount Larcom, north of Gladstone, had to flee with just minutes’ warning, taking just the clothes on their backs. He described the sky turning black, reducing the sun to a “glowing” red fireball. “You could see the smoke getting much, much worse,” he said. “You knew you were in trouble... The wind was just horrific when we left, it was nearly blowing me over, actually.”

Queensland State Disaster Commissioner Bob Gee said conditions were “not normal for Queensland” and “people would burn to death” if they did not heed warnings to evacuate. Some residents complained of being “nearly arrested” by police to force them into paddy wagons to flee.

Because of its normally higher humidity, Queensland previously has been spared the frequent fire disasters that strike Australia’s southern states, but this week’s dry heat broke many records. Summer has not even begun, yet temperatures soared above 40C (104F) in many locations.

Weather bureau forecaster Bruce Gunn said “too many records” were set on Wednesday to list them all.

Temperatures in Rockhampton reached 41.7C and Mackay had an unprecedented six consecutive days above 35C.

The weather conditions were unlike anything seen before, Gunn said. “In the past in Queensland, we’ve only found a few minutes (of catastrophic conditions) here and there in individual events. In Rockhampton we had catastrophic conditions sustained for 3.5 hours. Certainly something outside our experience.”

This is a foretaste of a potentially disastrous summer across Australia. In its latest Seasonal Bushfire Outlook, the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre predicted “above-normal” fire risks across much of southern Australia, due to very low rainfall and “above average” temperatures. The Bureau of Meteorology, in its detailed outlook for summer, warned that most of Australia has an 80 percent chance of higher-than-normal temperatures between December and February.

In a display of official indifference, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said neither he nor Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack planned to visit the fire-ravaged area. Morrison said people needed to “focus on the firefighting effort and the firefighting response.”

Morrison told reporters in Canberra: “The entire country is there to help in this time of great need.” But his Liberal-National Coalition government merely activated a national disaster assistance plan, allowing the Queensland state Labor Party government to seek as-yet unspecified federal help and financial assistance.

State Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk described the fire situation as “off the charts ... nobody has recorded these conditions any time in the history of Queensland.” While the fires are unprecedented, however, the emergency provides more evidence of the disastrous impact of the extreme weather events caused by climate change. Scientists have long warned of these processes.

An Australian Climate Council report in 2015 found there had been a nearly 20 percent increase in global fire seasons between 1978 and 2013. As a result, firefighters had less time to carry out hazard reduction burns, undertake training and community awareness campaigns, or give crews a rest. And firefighting personnel and equipment could not easily be shared between countries in the northern and southern hemispheres.

In a report published on Wednesday by the medical journal, scientists and health experts from 27 organisations around the world said climate change impacts—from heatwaves to worsening storms, floods and fires—were surging and threatened to overwhelm health systems.

Rising heat and wilder weather linked to climate change made it “the biggest global health threat of the 21st century.” Already, 157 million more people worldwide were exposed to heatwaves last year than in 2000.

Despite increasingly dire warnings from scientists, Australian governments, like capitalist states around the world, have demonstrated their inability to take the necessary measures to halt global warming. International agreements that have been adopted are totally inadequate, and even these are under constant attack as each ruling class seeks to maximise corporate profits.



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