

Australian bushfire emergency worsens but government denounces climate change warnings

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Catastrophic bushfire conditions are forecast this week for tinder dry regions of three Australian states. This will intensify a disaster that already has killed three people, injured more than 200—including volunteer firefighters—and destroyed nearly 200 homes since last Friday.

Fatigued firefighters are battling over 100 fires in New South Wales (NSW) and neighbouring Queensland. The fire authorities warned that Tuesday's bushfire risk for Greater Sydney and nearby areas to the west, north and south was "catastrophic." This is the first time the Sydney region has been given that rating since the classification was introduced in 2009.

Many residents who fled the blazes described the fire storms as "apocalyptic." Some spot fires erupted more than 10 kilometres from fire fronts, ignited by ember attacks, and quickly engulfed houses or entire communities. For example, in the small town of Torrington in northeastern NSW, where 12 homes were lost last Friday, residents were terrified they would die, trapped in the town's tin shed fire station.

One survivor, Linda Birch, told the media: "It wasn't a bushfire, it was a firestorm. The ferocity of this storm was that immense that we needed to put masks on within the shed as well. The sound was like a freight train, we couldn't hear ourselves."

Underscoring the historical dimension of the disaster, this year's summer "fire season" began during early spring. The toll is already the worst since 173 people were killed and 2,000 homes were destroyed in the southern state of Victoria's "Black Saturday" inferno on February 7, 2009.

NSW Liberal-National Premier Gladys Berejiklian yesterday declared a state of emergency for seven days covering Sydney and the nearby Blue Mountains, Hunter and Central Coast regions for the first time in history. The last time a fire emergency was declared in the state was 2013 when there were extensive bushfires in the Blue Mountains.

NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Commissioner Shane

Fitzsimmons on Monday stressed the gravity of the dry, hot and windy conditions. "Catastrophic is off the conventional scale," he said. "We are talking about indices that go well beyond the old scale of 100." He said almost one million hectares of land had been scorched across NSW since last month—almost more than the last three fire seasons combined.

Fitzsimmons declared that households had to make their own fire plans. "No one can guarantee that a fire engine or a firefighter will be at your front door," he said. Fitzsimmons said the RFS was exploring with its US and Canadian counterparts the possibility of bringing in North American crews over summer, reciprocating support given by Australia. But North America is confronting similar disastrous extensions of "fire seasons," with wildfires and mass evacuations continuing in California this month.

Today, Fitzsimmons revealed that just "in the order of" 3,000 firefighters—many of them overstretched volunteers or trainees—are deployed or on standby, facing fire fronts exceeding 1,000 kilometres in a state bigger than Texas and with more than 7.5 million people.

Many aspects of life are endangered. More than 600 schools, technical colleges, child care centres and university campuses were closed in NSW as of Monday, disrupting or postponing exams for thousands of students. Regional train services were cancelled, the main Sydney-Brisbane freeway was cut for periods and many roads remain closed.

To the north, in Queensland, Labor Party Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk declared a state of fire emergency for the first time in that state's history, saying fires were burning in places that had never before been affected. Areas near Brisbane, the state capital, were affected, as well as the Sunshine Coast, the Scenic Rim region and in central coastal Queensland.

Fires also have broken out on the other side of the continent, near Perth, the West Australian capital. Beyond the fire zones, people's health has been threatened by smoke-

filled air, with toxicity readings exceeding safe limits.

The primary response of the federal government and voices in the media establishment has been to lash out at anyone drawing attention to the heightened fire dangers produced by the accelerating climate change caused by carbon emissions.

While feigning sympathy for the victims, government leaders were intent on demonising people—including evacuees and local mayors—who pointed to the scientifically-proven connection between global warming and the increased risk of fires and other extreme weather-related events.

Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack, the leader of the agribusiness-based National Party, caused widespread outrage by denouncing the “disgraceful, disgusting” behaviour of “raving inner city lunatics” for linking climate change to the ferocious fires.

“What people need now is a little bit of sympathy, understanding and real assistance,” McCormack declared on Monday. “They don’t need the ravings of some pure, enlightened and woke capital city greenies.”

Likewise, Prime Minister Scott Morrison refused to answer journalists’ questions about the impact of climate change when he visited an evacuation centre. “I’m focused on the needs of the people in this room today,” Morrison claimed. A protester who yelled “climate change is real, can’t you see?” was bundled out of the building.

Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese was likewise evasive when reporters asked him about climate change links. “There is a need, once we get through this period, to really have a look at what the science is telling us and what the experts are telling us,” he said on Sunday, refusing to say anything that would displease the corporate elite.

As many people commented on social media, if now is not the time to address climate change, when is it?

Among those voicing opposition was Carol Sparks, the mayor of the fire-affected community of Glen Innes in northern NSW, who was herself evacuated and suffered damage to her home on the weekend. It was a question of science, she said. “It’s climate change, there’s no doubt about it. The whole of the country is going to be affected. We need to take a serious look at our future.”

Governments have also denied any responsibility for the lack of preparation for the emergency, including years of cutbacks to fire services, such as \$78 million in NSW alone this year. These cuts, plus the extended fire “season,” have limited the capacity of fire services to conduct winter backburning to reduce foliage.

The fraud of the government’s professed concern for the victims was underlined by the pittance in financial support offered to those who have lost their homes or suffered

injuries. “Disaster recovery” payments are only \$1,000 for adults and \$400 per child aged under 16. People who have lost their incomes may be eligible for poverty-line welfare benefits for up to 13 weeks.

Soaring insurance premiums mean that struggling households and businesses cannot afford cover, so they face devastation. A recent official inquiry found that premiums in parts of northern Australia rose 130 percent over the past decade.

Although the relationship between fire and climate change is complex, scientific studies have long warned of the underlying connections. In the latest summary of work by its member scientists, the Australian Academy of Science said: “The drier the fuel, the more likely it is to burn. Increased average temperatures caused by climate change will contribute to fuel dryness.”

The Australian Bureau of Meteorology says Australia has warmed by 1°C since 1910 and temperatures will keep increasing. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says it is extremely likely that increased greenhouse gases since the mid-20th century is the main reason for rising temperatures.

Above-average temperatures now occur most years in Australia. This year, the continent recorded its hottest-ever month in January, its third-hottest July and its hottest October day in some areas.

This week’s calamity is another indictment of the capitalist profit system. Despite claims of official action, greenhouse gases have risen under both Liberal-National and Labor-led governments, with the vast majority of emissions coming from industrial, mining and other corporate operations. Yet the Greens, the supposed environmental party, claim that the problem can be resolved through the same profit-driven economic system that is responsible for this immense crisis.



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