

Australia: Bushfires continue to ravage New South Wales and Queensland

Martin Scott

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Four people have died since last Friday as a result of bushfires still raging across the Australian states of New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland (QLD). The fires have destroyed at least 315 homes, while more than one million hectares of land has been burnt out.

Although conditions have eased slightly since the “catastrophic” risk warning was issued for Greater Sydney and surrounding regions on Tuesday, there are still more than 130 fires burning across the two states, and state of emergency declarations remain in place. People in two Queensland townships were issued evacuation orders Thursday morning, as firefighters struggled to keep a blaze within containment lines.

Years of record-breaking drought across large areas of the continent, and months of hot, dry weather—this year is likely to be the hottest in Australia’s history—have created vast amounts of dry fuel, which causes fires to burn hotter and move faster than usual.

The critical lack of water confronting many parts of the country means that some areas, like Stanthorpe in southeast Queensland, will be forced to use the last of their drinking water to try to extinguish the fires.

Fire services in both NSW and Queensland have had their budgets slashed in recent years. This year, the NSW state Liberal government cut \$28.5 million from Fire and Rescue, and \$49.9 million from the Rural Fire Service. The Queensland Labor government this year cut the state’s Rural Fire Service budget by \$13 million—almost 25 percent.

As a result, the already heavily volunteer-dependent rural fire services do not have anywhere near the resources needed to protect people and their homes from “apocalyptic” fire storms like those seen this week. Compounding the problem, reports emerged earlier this week that frontline firefighters in NSW had been diverted into inspecting hundreds of buildings

across the state for possibly flammable cladding.

Additional firefighters and equipment have been flown in from Melbourne, Canberra, and New Zealand in an attempt to assist overstretched personnel.

Historically, firefighters and resources have been shared between countries, but as the effects of climate change cause fire “seasons” in the northern and southern hemispheres to overlap, this may no longer be feasible.

Given the lack of resources in the firefighting services, governments have had to turn to the military for support. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has provided air transport for firefighters and equipment, accommodation, catering, aircraft refuelling, as well as “planning and liaison support.” The deployment of military personnel and resources in response to natural disasters points to the gross disparity in funding between emergency services and the armed forces.

Reports have emerged that a fire in the Gold Coast hinterland may have been started by a military training exercise at the nearby Kokoda Barracks. While an ADF spokesperson told media that “it would be inappropriate to comment on the causes of the fire,” a post on the Lower Beechmont Rural Fire Brigade Facebook page by Colonel Arran Hassell said: “I am conscious that we had an Army unit conducting training in the east of the training area the week when the fire started.”

According to Lower Beechmont residents, Defence personnel asked a local community group to remove any discussion of the ADF’s role in starting the fire from their Facebook page.

A “snap” protest organised overnight by School Strike 4 Climate saw hundreds of students and workers gather in Sydney on Tuesday morning. Speakers emphasised the unprecedented scale and severity of this

year's bushfire "season"—already well underway in mid-spring—and criticised the refusal of state and federal governments to address climate change, or to even acknowledge its role in the fires.

Addressing the rally, Jacqui Mumford, lead organiser at the Nature Conservation Council, said: "To those who say it is too soon to talk about climate change, I say ... it is not soon enough!"

The protest was held outside NSW parliament, where the Legislative Assembly (lower house) was set to debate the Environmental Planning Assessment Amendment Bill. The bill would remove the requirement for planning authorities to consider "downstream" greenhouse gas emissions when approving new coal mines and gas fields. Mumford said: "We are here because, instead of acting to prevent this cataclysm, our government is voting today to ignore the contribution NSW coal mines make to climate change."

The political perspective of the rally was limited to making three demands of the state government: withdraw the bill, boost funding for the Rural Fire Service, and make funds available for emergency relief.

Despite broad consensus among scientists, local residents, and frontline firefighters that this year's "mega fires" are "not normal," government leaders have refused to discuss the link to climate change. Instead, as fires continue to burn around the country, it has engaged in a bitter, though politically hollow, mud-slinging match with representatives of the Greens.

Following Nationals leader Michael McCormack's condemnation of "woke capital city greenies," Barnaby Joyce, former leader of the party, blamed the bushfires on a lack of winter hazard reduction burning, which he claimed was a result of Greens policy.

Former NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Greg Mullins refuted that claim. He wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "Warmer, drier conditions with higher fire danger are preventing agencies from conducting as much hazard reduction burning."

Greens Senator Jordon Steele-John accused the federal government of being "no better than a bunch of arsonists" because of their support of coal-fired power. An editorial in the *Australian* on Wednesday responded by labelling the Greens' comments as "utterly vile allegations" and "offensive extremism."

Among ordinary people witnessing the political

charade, anger is rising over the conditions they have been left to cope with, not only over the coming weeks, but into the future. Weather conditions are forecast to worsen with the onset of summer and the traditional fire season, and the risk of deadly and immensely destructive bushfires will rise exponentially across the country.



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