

Bush fires claim lives and property as Australia endures hottest days in recorded history

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Two volunteer firefighters were killed and three injured last night in a vehicle accident while fighting raging fires southwest of Sydney. Three other volunteers were severely burnt when flames overran their crew. The deaths and injuries were the most tragic price paid in a day that saw dozens of homes razed to the ground and millions of people endure the combination of stifling heat and hazardous levels of smoke-caused air pollution.

National parkland and forests to the southwest, west and northwest of Sydney have been ablaze for months, engulfing the city of some five million people with vast smoke clouds. Since September, some 2.7 million hectares have gone up in flame in the state of New South Wales alone, with hundreds of thousands of hectares more in Queensland, Western Australia, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. Cumulatively, an area larger than the European country of Belgium has been burnt out across Australia before the most intense period of the annual fire season even begins.

Yesterday, the predominantly volunteer fire services in NSW confronted over 100 fires, including 53 that were assessed as “uncontrolled.” Over 2,500 firefighters were deployed.

Among the most intense and dangerous was the Green Wattle Creek fire burning in bushland southwest of Sydney, and threatening towns such as Bargo, Buxton, Balmoral and Tahmoor. Residents were advised that it was “too late to leave,” as fire forced the closures of roads and rail lines. Throughout the day, at least 20 houses were destroyed, along with other buildings and vehicles.

Raging flames near Bargo overtook a five-member crew. Two male firefighters, aged 36 and 56, had to be

airlifted for emergency treatment for serious facial, body and airway burns. A female firefighter had to be treated for burns and smoke inhalation.

At approximately 11.30 p.m., a falling tree hit a fire truck, and its volunteer crew from the Sydney suburb of Horsley Park, as the vehicle travelled as part of a convoy to fight the fire near Buxton. The vehicle went off the road, killing two young fathers, 32-year-old Geoffrey Keaton and 36-year-old Andrew O’Dwyer, and injuring three others.

The fire risk to lives and property is expected to worsen in many parts of the country over the weekend, as powerful winds are forecast.

The development of such conditions has been predicted and warned about for years. Global climatic change is registering on the Australian continent by a rise in average annual temperatures, reduced rainfall, and more frequent drought conditions, together producing heightened danger of large-scale and catastrophic fire events.

According to the Bureau of Meteorology, Wednesday, December 17, 2019 was the hottest day in recorded Australian history, with an average maximum temperature of 41.9 degrees Celsius (107.4 degrees Fahrenheit). The previous recorded high was 40.9C on December 16, which exceeded the 40.3C registered in January 2013.

As a heat wave has moved west to east across the continent this week, temperatures soared in areas of Australia’s interior to the high 40s. Yesterday, the South Australian capital of Adelaide baked in 45.3C (113.54F) heat. Sydney’s outer suburb of Penrith experienced a maximum temperature of 44C, while the inner city, near the coast, reached over 42C.

The Air Quality Index (AQI) in Sydney once again passed far above the hazardous level of 200. In the fire-threatened town of Bargo, the AQI registered a staggering 2,831. In the nearby Sydney suburb of Campbelltown, it hit 1,430. Hospitals and emergency services have faced a spike of people requiring assistance for respiratory conditions, as well as heat-related illness. There is not yet an estimate of the number of deaths that can be directly traced to the impact of weeks of toxic air.

Political outrage is growing and will only increase. Most obviously, successive governments, and the corporations and wealthy they serve, have taken no serious action to stem climatic change. Carbon emissions on a global and national scale continue to increase.

The Australian government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison was denounced this week for its refusal to commit to reducing emissions at the United Nations climate summit underway in Madrid, Spain. It instead insisted on using carbon credits, in which the impact of emissions is purportedly offset by reductions achieved elsewhere.

Australian climate commentator and former government official Richie Merzian told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “There’s bushfires that are ravaging Australia right now that are clearly linked to climate change and that are choking Australia’s largest cities with all the smoke. Instead of coming to Madrid to argue for more global action to address climate change, Australia is lobbying to do less.”

Reminiscent of US President George W. Bush during the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans, Morrison quietly left the country to holiday in Hawaii as this week of catastrophic fires unfolded.

Successive governments have also made no attempt to prepare for the consequences of climate change, which in Australia is already becoming a “new normal” of extreme heat, drought, water shortages and extended fires seasons.

The lack of preparation is starkly revealed in the state of fire, health and other emergency services. Far from resources having been dedicated to developing a large, well-equipped professional firefighting force, what exists is an underfunded, overwhelmingly volunteer service. In NSW, the Rural Fire Service (RFS) has less than 1,000 paid staff to coordinate 72,500 volunteers,

who have to take time away from their employment to fight fires.

For decades, government priority has been lowering taxation on corporate profit and income. Virtually every area of public spending has barely kept pace with population growth or suffered outright cuts—with the exception of the military, which over the past decade has seen its budget ramped up significantly to purchase new war-fighting equipment.

Over \$50 billion, for example, has been allocated to acquiring 12 submarines, the first of which will not be finished until the mid-2030s and have been derided by critics as obsolete before they are even built. Support and infrastructure could see the final cost blow out to over \$200 billion. An immense expansion of firefighting and health services could have been financed just by using the resources being squandered on the submarine project.

Instead, local fire units have turned to asking for donations from the very communities that are bearing the brunt of the impact of the crisis. Joe Arena, the treasurer of the Copacabana Rural Fire Brigade on the Central Coast north of Sydney, attracted national attention this week after he posted a Facebook appeal for crowd-funded donations so his crew could purchase better quality protective masks.

In a post he deleted after criticism from the RFS hierarchy, Arena wrote: “Our brigade has been desperately trying to protect homes and property—completely exhausted—and I’m horrified to say this, using RFS-issued dust masks to protect our airways.”

On top of the inadequate protective gear, financial pressures and exhaustion faced by volunteers, crews also face the prospect of being called out to fight fires with trucks and equipment that has been rundown or damaged during earlier deployments.



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