

Fires create hellish conditions across Australia

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Samuel McPaul, a 28-year-old volunteer firefighter whose wife is expecting their first child in May, lost his life yesterday fighting the fires that are raging across much of Australia. He was killed when the truck from which he was working was flipped over by what officials described as “cyclonic winds” generated by a “fire tornado” to the east of the regional city of Albury-Wodonga, on the border between the states of New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. A 39-year-old member of his crew was severely injured and burnt, while the vehicle driver suffered minor injuries.

Samuel McPaul was the third volunteer firefighter to lose their life in the months-long Australian fire disaster, which is reaching a new level of intensity this week due to searing heat, intense winds and electrical storms. Official fire maps show blazes threatening lives and homes in every state and territory.

A mass evacuation order on Monday affecting an entire eastern region of Victoria underscored the severity of the bushfire and heat wave conditions. The state’s Country Fire Authority (CFA) broadcast the order on Sunday: “Everyone in East Gippsland must leave the area today due to the fire danger forecast for tomorrow. Do not travel to this area. It is not possible to provide support and aid to all the visitors currently in the East Gippsland region.”

The unprecedented order covered an area half the size of Belgium, including national parks, villages and towns whose population at this time of the year is swelled by more than 30,000 holidaymakers. People had just hours to pack up and leave.

More than 10 bushfires are burning in East Gippsland, with emergency warnings issued yesterday for dozens of small communities where residents are in danger. “Multiple properties” have been destroyed, according to Victorian authorities. Between 4,000 and 5,000 people in the coastal town of Mallacoota have sought safety on the beach as fire threatened homes and visibility was less than 50 metres.

On Monday, 40-plus degree heat was registered throughout Victoria, along with wind change gusts of up to 80 kilometres per hour and dry lightning strikes. Fires damaged homes in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, the state capital, forcing evacuations.

Fears that the Gippsland fires could close the Princes

Highway, the only major road left open in the region, prompted Victoria’s Emergency Management Commissioner Andrew Crisp to issue the order to leave East Gippsland.

Crisp said 550 state forest firefighters and 300 CFA volunteers were standing by, as well as 70 helicopters and water-bombing aircraft, but “there isn’t enough trucks to go around.” He warned residents: “So don’t count on a fire truck protecting your particular house. You need to get out of there.”

Crisp’s order, issued with the backing of the state’s Labor Party government, also highlighted the inadequacy of the fire-fighting resources provided by the state and federal governments, which continue to largely rely on exhausted volunteers to deal with one emergency after another.

It was considered too dangerous to send firefighters into the burning forests, so they were confined to protecting key assets and communities. Even then, Gippsland fires incident controller Ben Rankin said not all the properties and small towns were “fully defensible.” If the fire behaved in a particularly aggressive way, even tourist towns could be at risk.

People in Victoria were the most endangered yesterday because of high temperatures, high winds, low humidity and tinder-dry forests, but the crisis has spread throughout the continent since September.

Australia’s record for average maximum temperatures across the country has been broken twice already this month—by more than a degree—adding to the scientific evidence of the complex but undeniable connection between climate change and extreme weather and catastrophes such as fire.

Hellish conditions are being experienced by millions of people, both the residents of areas directly threatened by walls of fire and those in the major cities, including Sydney, where smoke has produced dangerously poor air quality, exceeding official “hazardous” levels, often for days on end.

More than five million hectares have burnt out this “fire season,” with months still to go. More than 1,000 homes have been lost and 10 people have died, including three volunteer firefighters. New South Wales (NSW) has been the worst-affected state so far, with 911 homes destroyed, along with 72 facilities and more than 2,000 outbuildings.

At least 100 fires are burning around the state, with more than 40 uncontained. “Mega-fires” have burnt for weeks to the

northwest, west and southwest of the state capital, Sydney, Australia's largest city with a population of five million. A map published by the Rural Fire Service graphically shows the vast area that has already burnt out and how fire is encroaching ever closer to major towns and the suburban outskirts of Sydney itself. [See map]

The worst fire danger in NSW is expected to come today, as a severe wind change was due to move north up the coast. Conditions in the entire coastal stretch of NSW from the Victorian border up to the greater Sydney region, then moving inland to the Hunter Valley, are rated as extreme.

Yesterday, the temperature in parts of every state and territory soared past 40 degrees Celsius (104F). That included Tasmania, the southern island state closest to Antarctica, where the gauges recorded maximums of 40.2C by midday, breaking century-old heat records.

Tasmanian Fire Service chief officer Chris Arnol warned on Monday that even homes built to the most modern standards could be indefensible as the fire danger reached "extreme" in parts of the state.

In South Australia, firefighters are battling catastrophic fire conditions in the Adelaide Hills, Kangaroo Island, the state's mid-north and Yorke Peninsula.

Despite recent patches of rain, dozens of fires are still burning in Queensland, where areas of rainforest, previously thought to be immune to fire, have been destroyed in recent months.

Fires are also threatening lives and homes in Western Australia, thousands of kilometres away. Blazes broke containment lines north of the port city of Albany, after blackening more than 16,600 hectares since being sparked by lightning on December 26. Another fire is posing a threat to people south of the Western Australian goldfields, after already burning through 148,000 hectares since mid-December.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison caused outrage earlier this month when he rejected calls for greater resources and for financial assistance for volunteer firefighters. He insisted that volunteers "want to be out there defending their communities."

Yesterday, however, it was revealed that the number of volunteer firefighters has fallen by about 18,000 over the past decade. Volunteer groups blamed dissatisfaction with an atmosphere of bullying, as well as an ageing cohort, rural population decline and changes to operations.

In NSW, only one in 10 Rural Fire Service (RFS) volunteers is aged 25 or younger, and the median age of volunteers is more than 50. The destruction of full-time jobs and the reliance of millions of people on on-call contract, casual and temporary employment has made volunteering for fire service untenable for many younger workers.

For weeks, volunteer brigades have complained of poor equipment, especially smoke masks, to cope with such fierce and protracted fires. Some have defied the fire authorities by conducting fund-raising activities to buy better gear.

In an attempt at political damage control, Morrison

announced on Sunday the federal government would compensate some NSW volunteer firefighters up to \$6,000 each. The backflip came after weeks of demands on the Liberal-National Coalition government to ease the strain on volunteers, some of whom have been fighting fires continuously for months with no financial assistance.

NSW RFS firefighters who are self-employed or work for small or medium-sized businesses can apply for \$300 a day, but only after 10 days on the front lines, up to a maximum of \$6,000, representing the equivalent of just 20 days' emergency leave.

Victoria's Labor government opposed even paying those meagre amounts. Victorian Emergency Services Minister Lisa Neville said: "This is against the spirit of volunteerism. This is not their second job. This is something they contribute their time, their energy, their commitment to and it's not about payment."

Neville echoed Morrison's initial indifference toward the volunteers, reflecting the longstanding bipartisan policy of imposing the burden of rural and semi-rural firefighting on volunteers.

In another sign of popular disgust, more than 260,000 people have signed a petition to call off tonight's New Year's Eve fireworks display on Sydney Harbour, with the funding redirected to drought and bushfire relief. However, both the federal, NSW and local governments declared the need to proceed with the display, which generates some \$130 million in revenue for the tourism industry.

Morrison stated: "I think it is important to send a message to the world ... We will keep doing what we do normally." City of Sydney spokeswoman Tanya Goldberg told the media: "Cancelling would seriously hurt Sydney businesses, particularly in the wake of reports of a weaker retail season."

Millions of people in Australia and internationally, however, are increasingly aware that corporate profit interests is the primary factor blocking any serious action to address climate change and its consequences, including the fire crisis.



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