

# Australians suffer violent hailstorms, flash floods and ongoing fires

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Tragedy struck again this week, with three volunteer American firefighters losing their lives when the Lockheed C-130 Hercules waterbomber they crewed crashed on Thursday in southern New South Wales (NSW). The cause is still under investigation. The body of a 59-year-old man was found in his burnt-out home on Friday in the south coast town of Bodalla, while six volunteer NSW firefighters were injured when their vehicle overturned.

The confirmed national death toll from the fire crisis now stands at 33. Over 2,500 homes have been destroyed and an estimated 12 million hectares of land has been affected.

Even as 100 fires continue to burn, severe thunderstorms wreaked havoc across eastern Australia this week, with heavy rain, gale-force winds and hailstorms causing damage to thousands of homes, businesses, and vehicles in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), NSW and Queensland. Although the heavy rainfall was welcomed by farmers and firefighters, it was not nearly enough to end the protracted drought afflicting much of the country.

As with the bushfires, this week's storms have exposed the inadequacies of Australia's largely volunteer-dependent emergency services. In many cases personnel and equipment had to be withdrawn from fighting fires to respond.

A violent storm hit the national capital Canberra on Monday, battering the city with golf ball-sized hail. The windscreens of thousands of cars were smashed and hundreds of homes suffered damage. At the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), 65 glasshouses where experimental crops were being grown were shattered, ruining years of research. Hail damage and flash flooding caused the closure of major institutions,

including the National Archives, National Museum of Australia, Old Parliament House, and the Australian National University.

The ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) fielded more than 1,900 calls for assistance, more than double the previous record for a single event, and more than three times the annual average.

Victoria had its wettest two-day period in many months on Sunday and Monday, with some areas receiving more than 100 millimetres. More than 55 millimetres fell in parts of the fire-ravaged East Gippsland region, providing some amount of relief for firefighters.

In Melbourne, the state capital, parts of the Monash freeway and the Princes highway—major thoroughfares connecting the south-eastern suburbs with the central business district—were brought to a standstill by hail and flash flooding.

In Pakenham, floodwaters as high as one metre caused chaos on suburban streets and forced the evacuation of around 100 children from a childcare centre. The south-eastern satellite suburb of Melbourne has undergone massive expansion in recent years, as workers and their families have been forced further out by stagnant wages, underemployment, and rising housing costs. Much of the new housing development has been on floodplains previously used only for agriculture.

In central NSW, the thunderstorms and strong winds moving across the drought-ravaged landscape whipped up a 300 kilometre-wide dust storm that plunged Dubbo, Broken Hill, Nyngan, and Parkes into total darkness.

In Sydney, rain, wind and hailstones caused chaos, particularly in the south-eastern suburbs. Three drivers were trapped in their cars by fallen trees, and trains

were cancelled for hours after part of a railway station roof fell on the track. Around 14,000 homes and businesses across the city were left without power on Monday night.

In all, an estimated 30,000 insurance claims relating to the storms have been filed in NSW, Victoria, and the ACT. The total value of the damage is estimated at more than \$320 million.

More than 300 millimetres of rain fell on south-east Queensland last Friday night, leading to flash floods which cut major highways and disrupted train services. Power outages left 20,000 homes and businesses without electricity.

Despite the massive downpours, the combined water storage capacity across south-east Queensland has increased by less than one percent, or about two weeks' supply. Because catchment areas are extremely dry, much of the rain was absorbed into the ground, reducing the run-off into creeks, rivers, dams and reservoirs.

The impact of the "supercell" storms was particularly violent as result of the years of drought. Trees that have been weakened by years of hot, dry weather are more prone to collapse in strong wind than healthy specimens. Severe flash flooding and landslides are also more likely when the vegetation that would otherwise absorb rainfall and hold soil together has been destroyed by extreme heat and fire.

While torrential rain and violent hailstorms may seem to be the opposite of drought, record-high temperatures, and unprecedented bushfires, they result from the same climate processes. Although the abnormally strong positive phase of the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD)—responsible for last year being Australia's driest on record—has now ended, ocean and soil temperatures remain unusually warm, creating ideal conditions for storms to develop.

The wild storms of last weekend were immediately followed by another heatwave, meaning any relief the rain brought to the firefighting effort was only temporary. Nearly 80 bushfires in NSW, and 20 in Victoria, continue to burn. With several more months of hot, dry weather likely, Australia's catastrophic summer is far from over.

Moreover, it was this time last year that entire regions of tropical north Queensland were inundated by some of the worst recorded floods. The February 2019 floods

damaged over 3,300 homes, of which at least 1,500 have had to be demolished or effectively rebuilt. An estimated 500,000 cattle drowned. Just the losses covered by insurance totaled over \$1.2 billion, but, as in the case of the fire crisis, many of the worst affected people had no insurance or inadequate coverage.

Other countries in the region have also been hard-hit this monsoon season. Flooding and landslides in Indonesia in the first week of the year forced hundreds of thousands of people to seek refuge in temporary shelters. Late last year, at least 75 people were killed in the Philippines as a result of severe floods.

The increased frequency and intensity of all types of extreme weather events is precisely what climate scientists predicted would be the impact of the 1.1 degree Celsius increase in average surface temperature since the industrial revolution. Unless global carbon emissions are drastically reduced, that figure is expected to climb to between 3 and 5 degrees Celsius.



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