# Australia’s fire crisis continues while flash floods hammer northern Queensland

**Martin Scott**
**1 February 2020**

Australia’s population has had another horror week of so-called natural disasters, again exposing the consequences of decades of inaction on climate change as well as the critical lack of civil planning and the inadequate resources for disaster management.

Amid heatwave conditions, bushfires again threatened southern parts of the country. In Canberra, a state of emergency was declared by the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) government on Friday as a fire in Namadgi National Park posed the greatest bushfire threat to the capital’s residents since 2003.

The blaze began when the landing light of a military helicopter ignited tinder-dry grass while carrying out “routine aerial reconnaissance” as part of fire preparations. As the season’s bushfires have exposed the woefully inadequate resources of firefighting services across the country, many have called for greater military deployment to help combat the fires. This incident exposes the dangers of relying on the armed forces as a substitute for properly-trained and prepared firefighters.

As with many of the hundreds of bushfires this season, firefighters were shocked by the speed with which the fire spread. ACT Rural Fire Services (RFS) Commissioner Joe Murphy said: “This is not a fire that is operating under normal rules.”

On Friday evening, the RFS warned that Canberra’s southernmost suburbs, Conder, Banks and Gordon, and the village of Tharwa, may face spot fires as a result of flying embers on Saturday afternoon, as temperatures soar past 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit). Residents of rural areas south of Canberra were advised to leave amid fears that it would soon become too dangerous to drive.

Following the disastrous 2003 bushfires, in which four people were killed, more than 200 injured, and hundreds of houses were destroyed, many residents criticised the lack of information provided by emergency services to warn of immediate danger. In a sign that little improvement has been made in 17 years, the Emergency Services Agency’s website—the official source for current information about the bushfire threat—went down on Friday. This followed a two-and-a-half hour outage on Thursday January 23, which has been blamed on a fault at Amazon Web Services.

In Tasmania, unusually warm conditions have fuelled fires at Winkleigh and Glengarry, in the north of the state, and Rossarden in the northwest. On Friday, maximums across the state were in the high 30s, and the state capital, Hobart, reached a new record of 40.9 degrees Celsius. There have only been 16 days in Tasmania’s history on which temperatures anywhere in the state exceeded 40 degrees Celsius, and three of those occurred in 2019.

In New South Wales (NSW), with the temperature forecast to reach 41 degrees on parts of the South Coast today, residents and tourists are again being urged by authorities to evacuate some areas that were devastated at the beginning of the year.

In Victoria, an emergency warning remained in place on Friday evening for a bushfire burning out-of-control at Cape Conran in the state’s southeast. Two other blazes, one near Bacchus Marsh, 50 kilometres northwest of Melbourne, and another at Bendoc, on the NSW border were downgraded to “Watch and Act” status.

More than 26,000 households in Victoria were without power on Friday evening after a storm brought down six power transmission towers near Cressy in the state’s west, breaking the interconnect with the South Australian electricity network. Amid temperatures exceeding 40 degrees and “unprecedented” overnight

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humidity, Melbourne residents were urged to minimise the use of air conditioners and other appliances in an effort to avoid further power outages.

In inland northern Queensland, heavy rain last weekend caused flooding and forced the closure of several major roads and rail lines. At Charters Towers, where 96mm (3.8 inches) of rain was recorded, a young man was taken to hospital after being swept away in a drain last Saturday night.

The coastal city of Townsville recorded 170mm of rain in the 48 hours to 9am Monday, leading to flash flooding in the city centre. Almost exactly one year ago, 2,000 homes in Townsville were submerged when the Ross River Dam overflowed, releasing a torrent of water into the Ross River, which runs through the city.

While this week's flooding was not on the same scale, it serves as a stark reminder that nothing has been done to address the planning issues exposed by the catastrophe. The city's Floodplain Management Strategy, based on modelling rather than historical data, has not been updated, and property development therefore continues on the basis that last year's flood was an isolated "freak" occurrence.

Many of the 30,000 insurance claims—totalling $1.269 billion—lodged in relation to the catastrophic event last February remain unresolved, and major community facilities, including the Riverway Arts Centre, are still closed to the public.

South of Townsville, the town of Ayr received 320mm of rain in 24 hours, breaking the 1998 record of 190mm. Nearby Rita Island recorded 529mm. A 63-year-old man was rescued after becoming trapped in his car by localised flooding at Giru.

In the western part of the state, Mount Isa also encountered flash flooding after receiving 121mm of rain. In the Central Highlands region, a family of four had to be rescued after being trapped in their car by floodwaters at Emerald.

A 61-year-old man died at Ravenshoe in the Far North Queensland Tablelands last Saturday when he was swept away by fast-flowing currents in Millstream Creek. The area had received more than 50mm of rain overnight.

Despite heavy rainfall across the Northern part of Australia in recent weeks, the Northern Territory is still set for it's second drier-than-average wet season in a row. The monsoon season has still not been officially declared, more than a month later than it usually begins, and later than the previous record of January 25, which occurred in 1973.

As well as replenishing water stocks in Australia's tropical areas, and bringing welcome relief to the Top End after months of heat and high humidity, the monsoon, combined with other weather systems, typically results in rainfall throughout the country. Its late onset means there is a very real chance that there will not be sufficient rainfall before winter to break the drought affecting much of Australia.

While heavy rainfall over summer is expected in tropical regions, the record-breaking downpours and the unusually late development of the monsoon are further indications that global climate change is having a very serious effect on weather and people across Australia.

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