Major Australian bushfires finally extinguished by torrential rain

Martin Scott
15 February 2020

Australia's east coast has again been hit by extreme weather this week, as a low pressure system resulted in months of average rain to fall in just days and cause flooding and disruption in many areas. The heavy rainfall had a welcome impact, however, extinguishing more than 30 fires across New South Wales (NSW), including the Gospers Mountain "mega-fire," which started in October, and the two-and-a-half-month Currowan blaze.

Together those two fires burned through more than a million hectares, destroyed more than 300 homes, and claimed at least three lives. The wet conditions have also allowed the 24 fires still burning across NSW to be contained.

The Rural Fire Service (RFS) has nevertheless cautioned that the bushfire threat is still far from over. A spokesman for the service told the *Guardian*: "As we've seen in the last couple of years, we've still had bushfires threaten homes in March and April. We know all it takes is a couple of weeks of warm and windy conditions."

The recent downpour has also calmed bushfires in Victoria, where the only "advice" level warning currently in place is for four small peat fires near Cape Conran in the state's southeast.

While the rain has provided some relief for firefighters battling blazes which have already burned 1.5 million hectares across the state, many of the remaining fires in NSW are close to the border, and still present a threat to Victoria if hot and dry conditions return. Four of the five deadliest bushfires in Victorian history have occurred in February or March.

Sydney received 400 millimetres of rain in the four days to Monday morning, more than the city has seen in the previous six months. At least 4,000 people were forced to evacuate from flooding across the city, mostly in the south-western suburbs bordering the Georges River, and on the Northern Beaches.

In southeast Queensland, a 75-year-old man was found dead in the flooded Mary River on Thursday, and a 26-year-old woman is still missing in Tallebudgera Valley. More than 200mm of rain fell in 24 hours on the Sunshine Coast, leading to major floods and evacuations, including 40 people at an aged care facility in Mt Coolum. Heavy rainfall also caused dangerous flooding in Brisbane, the Gold Coast, and the Toowoomba region.

The Byron Shire Council and Tweed Shire Council areas in northern NSW were declared natural disaster zones on Thursday afternoon after more than a metre of rain was recorded in 24 hours. Schools and roads were closed in Lismore on Friday as Wilsons River rose above the "moderate flood level" of 7.2m.

Parts of northwest NSW had their most substantial rainfall in two years, with Collarenebri, Keveline (50 km south of Walgett), and Narrabri receiving more than 100mm. The region is so dry that it will take 15 times more rain—five more record-breaking months, or two wetter-than-average years—to break the drought.

At Lake Conjola on the NSW South Coast, where dozens of homes were lost to fire just six weeks ago, streets and homes were flooded after the area received 100mm of rain over the weekend. Emergency workers dug a channel from the overflowing lake to the sea, but residents criticised the council for failing to do this earlier, claiming it could have prevented damage to their properties.

Sydney's Northern Beaches were hit by "abnormally high tides," resulting in the erosion of up to 25 metres of beach and sand dunes at Collaroy and Narrabeen. Ten Collaroy properties were destroyed by storms in 2016, leading to renewed calls for a protective sea wall,

© World Socialist Web Site

but residents are still waiting for it to be built, despite having agreed to finance 90 percent of the construction themselves.

In the 48 hours to 8 a.m. Monday, emergency services in NSW responded to more than 26,000 calls for help, including flood rescues, trees falling on cars and houses, and widespread chaos on the roads. More than 200,000 properties in the region suffered power blackouts over the weekend, and more than 15,000 homes and businesses were still waiting for power to be restored on Friday morning.

Six children were rescued from a school bus which became trapped in flood waters at Maraylya in Sydney's northwest. Underscoring the rapid shift from one extreme weather event to the next, several of the rescue workers were RFS volunteers who have been battling the Gospers Mountain bushfire since mid-November. A mother and four children suffered carbon monoxide poisoning from a petrol-powered generator and had to be rescued from their home at Georges Hall in south-west Sydney.

Most of Sydney's railway lines faced major disruptions, while "urgent infrastructure repairs" had to be carried out at the city's Central station after four platforms were rendered inaccessible. The already bushfire-damaged Blue Mountains line was partially closed after a landslide at Leura and is not expected to re-open for several weeks.

The nine-month-old Metro North West line was brought to a halt for three days after more than 5 million litres of water flooded several of its "older" tunnels. Unlike the newer tunnels on the line, these tunnels, which have flooded before, are not fitted with waterproof gaskets.

Sydney's dams received massive inflows, and the city's overall water storage is now three-quarters full, up 33 percent from a week ago. Experts have warned that the large and intense inflows, particularly in catchment areas covered with ash and debris, may create the conditions for cyanobacterial and algal blooms, and a drop in dissolved oxygen levels. The risks are greater for smaller systems, and there is a high chance that the recent rains will lead to fish kills in some areas.

Ausgrid, the private company which owns the electricity networks in Sydney, the Central Coast, and the Hunter region, claimed that the scale of the disaster meant that it could not find enough contractors to clear trees and other debris that were obstructing power lines and access roads.

The company has sacked more than 2,000 workers since 2014, leading to reports that the number of staff has fallen to 3,238—below the legal mandate of 3,570 enshrined when the NSW government sold the network off in 2015. Trevor Armstrong, Ausgrid's chief operating officer, disputed the claims, saying that the leaked figure did not include more than 700 long-term contractors. He added, however, that "no good business would resource up to the level required to meet this sort of natural disaster."

Lacking the resources to restore power to its customers' properties, Ausgrid took the extraordinary step of asking for military assistance. The NSW government rejected the appeal, but eventually agreed to send an additional 100 State Emergency Service (SES) personnel to join the 600 SES volunteers already aiding the clean-up effort.

Between February 5 and February 10, at least 10,000 insurance claims were filed over storm-related damage, worth around $45 million. The Insurance Council of Australia responded by declaring the sixth catastrophe in five months. Since October, fires and storms have led to more than 122,000 claims, totalling more than $2.5 billion.

In the absence of any rational plan to combat climate change, provide emergency responders with adequate resources, or insist that privately-owned utility companies maintain their essential services, the Australian establishment has careered from one catastrophe to the next, merely hoping that, as in the case of this week's rain, one disaster will end another.

While Prime Minister Scott Morrison has begrudgingly accepted that climate change is responsible for this "new normal," he, in lockstep with Labor leader Anthony Albanese, continues to defend the profit interests of the fossil fuel conglomerates rather than the health and safety of the Australian people and environment.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site