

Large swaths of south-eastern Australia hit by floods

Oscar Grenfell
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A flood crisis which began last Thursday is continuing to expand, with the disaster impacting directly on tens of thousands across south-east Australia and imperiling hundreds of thousands or even millions more. The two largest east-coast states—Victoria and New South Wales (NSW)—have been affected, along with Tasmania, while there are warnings of possible flooding in Queensland.

While in some areas, residents are beginning the painful process of cleaning up inundated homes, the dangers are far from over. In large parts of Victoria, authorities have warned that swollen rivers have yet to peak, meaning that there are ongoing dangers of greater flooding. The threat includes regional and rural areas along the Victoria and NSW border, with the danger extending into the latter state.

While heavy rains have eased over the past day, showers and storms are forecast for NSW. Then, from Wednesday, meteorologists are predicting that a low, developing in central Australia, will move east, threatening rainfalls of 20 to 50 millimetres across much of the east coast, including those areas that have already flooded. The flood crisis, some experts have warned, could persist at various levels of intensity for the next six weeks.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) this morning, federal Emergency Management Minister Murray Watt said that “We could be looking at up to 9,000 homes inundated in northern Victoria and potentially close to about 34,000 homes in Victoria either inundated or isolated.” That would make the current crisis one of the worst flooding disasters to occur in Victoria in decades.

Already, the Victorian State Emergency Service (SES) has reported close to 5,000 calls for assistance, which have led to the organisation conducting some 600 rescues.

Over the weekend, the northern Victorian town of Rochester was entirely inundated. Local SES controller

Tim Williams told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that all of the town’s 3,100 residents have been affected. “Every single house in town will have water,” Rochester said. He noted that many homes that had been spared in 2011 floods had this time not escaped the floodwaters.

While many of the town’s residents appear to have evacuated, there were confronting scenes when the deluge reached Rochester on Friday and Saturday. In images reminiscent of the Lismore floods early this year in northern NSW, locals rescued one another using small boats and other improvised crafts.

On Saturday morning, emergency services discovered the body of 71-year-old Kevin Wills in his backyard. The Rochester resident is the first confirmed fatality in the current floods. His wife only narrowly escaped, having been trapped in the house before being rescued.

Shepparton, a major regional city two hours north of Melbourne has also been hit, with hundreds of homes damaged. While thousands have been evacuated from the working-class city of some 77,000, authorities have warned that it is now too dangerous for those who remain to try and flee.

Echuca, a town of 15,000 further north, was hit by floodwaters when the Murray River overflowed on Sunday. There are warnings that the hundreds of homes already damaged will be joined by hundreds more over the coming days.

Ron Ash, a 77-year-old resident whose home was inundated yesterday, said it was the first time he had seen a major flooding event. He told the ABC that he was “devastated,” adding, “There’s nothing you can do about it—the water’s here, we knew it was coming, but when it goes through your house you sort of think, what’s going to happen next?”

Dozens of smaller towns have been or are expected to be impacted. An untold number of people in more isolated properties, outside major towns and regional cities, have

been cut off as roads have been submerged. More than 1,800 people are without power. Authorities have stated that the full impact will not be known for days or weeks.

The flood has also struck Melbourne, the state capital and the second-largest city in the country. On Friday, sections of central Melbourne were deluged as the Maribyrnong River overflowed its banks. At one stage, more than 40 Melbourne suburbs were under a flood alert.

Hundreds of homes were damaged in Moonee Ponds and surrounding areas. Residents have condemned the state warning system, with many saying they were only sent text messages alerting them that their home was likely to flood after 2 a.m. on Friday morning, giving them no time to prepare for the inundation.

There is also substantial anger over a flood wall around the Flemington Racecourse. Pictures posted by the press and to social media showed the grounds of the racecourse protected from the floodwater, while virtually all neighboring homes and residential areas were under floodwaters. Flemington is home to the Melbourne Cup, the most lucrative horse race in the country, and the spring racing season has begun.

Dozens of homes near the Maribyrnong River have been gutted, with owners placing mountains of damaged contents in front of their properties. A commercial cleaner working on one of the impacted homes told the WSWS that the cleaning bill would likely run to \$20,000 per home.

In NSW, the town of Forbes has been hit by floodwaters. In total, 31 Local Government Areas in the state are still in a disaster declared state, with the risk of further inundation remaining.

In Tasmania, almost 100 properties are confirmed to have been damaged, after flooding struck the north-west of the island state over the weekend.

As in all previous natural disasters, the floods have highlighted the lack of any national disaster body responsible for developing a coordinated and cohesive response to these events. Successive inquiries into past bushfires and floods have called for the formation and funding of such a body, but it has been stymied by governments.

Instead, ordinary people are left to defend their properties, conducting much of the sand-bagging and other measures aimed at preventing inundation. The various State Emergency Services (SESs) are woefully under-resourced and are staffed primarily by volunteers.

Again, the absence of any civilian disaster force has been used to deploy the military, with one hundred

Australian Defence Force personnel dispatched in Victoria. The use of the army in such situations is now standard procedure. Its purpose is to justify the refusal of governments to allocate sufficient resources to combating floods and fires, and to condition the population for the greater domestic use of the armed forces under conditions of social crisis and widespread opposition among working people.

The woefully-inadequate response to the Lismore floods, in which residents were left to rescue one another and flood victims remain homeless, provoked mass anger. In the current floods, all of the governments involved have responded nervously, fearful of a repeat.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews declared this morning that money "would not be an issue." He claimed that uninsured flood victims would be able to apply for a government grant to recoup their losses and to repair damage. It is, however, capped at just over \$40,000 and has to go through an approval process.

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese gave a press conference with extreme right-wing NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet, where they made similar statements. The conference is only the latest display of the complete bipartisanship that exists within the political establishment.

The federal government is rolling out one-off payments of just \$1,000 per adult and \$400 per child in select flood-affected areas. Additional, capped assistance will need to be applied for. The woeful payments contrast with the Labor government's commitment to "Stage Three" tax cuts, that will overwhelmingly benefit the wealthy, worth \$243 billion over a decade. They are also at odds with the hundreds of billions being spent on the military, in preparation for war.

The floods will be used to intensify an onslaught on the social conditions of working people. Federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers, who is preparing to release an austerity budget next week, has declared that the disaster will further constrain national finances. At the same time, he and others have predicted that it will result in further price increases, especially for food, under conditions of a skyrocketing cost of living and stagnant or declining wages.



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