

Despite warning from northern hemisphere bushfires, Australia is unprepared for the fire season

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The Australian spring started with a heat wave hitting large parts of the continent's southeast this week, indicating that the country faces a devastating bushfire season. Warnings issued by the scientific community that the season may prove disastrous have largely been ignored by the Albanese Labor government.

As the Canadian wildfire emergency extends into September, Australian firefighters will be returning from that country with possibly no break before being confronted with fires in Australia. The bushfire season threatens to extend around the globe and to last all year.

As the Australian Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) declared an El Niño weather system on Tuesday, numerous bush and grass fires broke out along the east coast of the country. A total fire ban was declared for Sydney on September 19, signalling an extreme fire threat.

The world's climate has experienced a La Niña weather system for the past three years. La Niña generally produces wet and cool conditions, though this has been impacted substantially by global warming. The shift to an El Niño system indicates hot and dry conditions.

El Niño and La Niña are part of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) weather pattern that strongly influences the world's climate. They are based on temperature differentials in the central and eastern Pacific Ocean.

In August, the BOM reported that a positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) had developed. This is associated with hot and dry weather for the Australian continent. The IOD is the difference in sea surface temperature between the western pole in the Arabian Sea and an eastern pole in the Indian Ocean south of Indonesia.

The bushfire threat has been exacerbated across the planet. According to a World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) statement issued on September 9, the earth had experienced the hottest three-month period on record. During the same period, sea surface temperatures were at unprecedented highs.

The BOM indicated that Australia had experienced its warmest winter on record, with 1.53 degrees Celsius above the long-term average, and the highest since national records began in 1910. The previous highest record was 1.46 degrees Celsius in 1996.

The Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council (AFAC) Seasonal Bushfire Outlook for spring 2023 stated: "Australia's climate influences have shifted significantly since last spring, with above average temperatures and below average rainfall expected for almost the entire country for the coming season. Many regions have also seen increased fuel growth due to above average rainfall throughout recent La Niña years, which is contributing to increased risk of bushfire across locations in Australia during the spring 2023."

The outlook said: "Increased risk of fire is expected for regions in Queensland, NSW, Victoria, SA and NT."

A report published by the Climate Council on February 22, "Powder Keg: Australia Primed to Burn," provided a stark warning of the heightened fire risk across the country.

The report explained that after every occasion where there have been three successive La Niña events, there have been grass fires due to prodigious vegetation growth:

"There have been three 'protracted' La Niña episodes since 1950: 1954?1957, 1973?1976, and 1998?2001. During each of these periods there was prolific growth of vegetation, followed by extensive grass fires across Australia, then by major forest fires causing loss of life and property on the east coast, particularly in New South Wales. Australia experienced the most widespread grass fires ever recorded in 1974?1975."

One of the authors of the report, former commissioner of Fire and Rescue New South Wales Greg Mullins, described the vegetation growth at a press conference launching the report. "It's west of the divide and it's right through Central

Australia, the Simpson Desert, Alice Springs, Larapinta, parts of South Australia, Queensland, Victoria — it's national," Mullins said.

In August, Professor of Pyrogeography and Fire Science at the University of Tasmania David Bowman wrote a piece in the *Conversation* titled: "Australia is sleepwalking: a bushfire scientist explains what the Hawaii tragedy means for our flammable continent."

Bowman described the recent Maui wildfires in Hawaii as a "portent of what Australia and other countries will experience in a warmer world."

Bowman invoked Australia's 2019-20 bushfire season. These bushfires burnt an unprecedented 8.4 million hectares of bush and prime agricultural land. They destroyed 2,000 homes and at least 25 people died. They produced an environmental disaster as hundreds of millions of wild animals were killed and their habitats destroyed. The pall of smoke haze that swept over cities and towns killed even more people.

Bowman concluded: "Almost three years on, we haven't seen the changes needed... Australia is sleepwalking into our fiery future."

During the 2019-20 fires, the Morrison Liberal-National government expressed its complete indifference and contempt, abandoning fire-ravaged communities.

The Albanese Labor government has continued the same policy, with some affected by February 2022 floods still living in temporary shelters.

The Morrison and Albanese governments have pushed aside calls that they rapidly invest in fire-detecting satellite technology. That is crucial in addressing bushfires before they get out of control.

Currently the identification of fires relies on reports from fire spotters perched on high towers.

The deployment of dedicated fire-spotting Low-Earth orbit satellites (LEOs) will not occur until 2027, according to Simon Jones, Professor of Remote Sensing and the Director of the Remote Sensing and Photogrammetry Research Centre at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University Simon Jones.

Another recommendation from a Royal Commission into the 2019-20 bushfires that has not been fulfilled was that governments purchase a dedicated fleet of aerial water bombers. This has become critical as internationally fire seasons are extending into each other.

"You need aerial firefighting," Bowman told the *Age*. "But not at the expense of everything else. They're not even

doing that bit, which is politically the simplest. You can understand why fire scientists are depressed and shaking their heads in disbelief."

According to former Victoria emergency manager commissioner Craig Lapsley, the Victorian fleet has been reduced by two crafts by the Andrews Labor government. "Aerial resources are becoming more critical in firefighting," he said. "To me, it's not the right time to be reducing resources," Lapsley said.

The fraudulent response of governments to disasters such as bushfires was demonstrated in January 2022, when the Labor Party made an election promise to revamp a \$4.7 billion fund set up by the Morrison government to improve Australia's disaster "readiness."

"Thousands of Australians who face bushfires, floods and cyclones every year deserve to be protected by a federal government who plans ahead and invests to keep them safe," Labor leader Anthony Albanese, now the prime minister, said.

In fact, this was a sop to the financial markets, as the amount would be invested, with only the returns spent for mitigation programs. This investment was expected to generate \$200 million per year, a totally miniscule amount to be spread across the continent, even if it ever eventuated.

What is clear is that capitalist governments are completely indifferent to the plight of ordinary people and tailor their response to disasters such as bushfires to the interests of big business. The Albanese Labor government spends billions on developing the war drive against China and Russia while at the same time handing over massive income tax cuts to the wealthiest sections of society.

The official indifference to expert warnings demonstrates the necessity for the working class to fight for socialism with a planned economy to meet the challenge of climate change based on social and human need, not profit.



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