

Devastating fires in Australian state of Victoria burn out of control

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9 January 2026

Tens of thousands of people across the southeast Australian state of Victoria are confronting a mounting social catastrophe as out-of-control bushfires, fanned by record heat and ferocious winds, tear through farming districts and rural townships in the state's central and northeastern regions and could continue for weeks.

The inferno centred in Longwood and Ruffy (130 kilometres northeast of state capital Melbourne) alone has burned more than 84,000 hectares, while a second major blaze near Walwa and Mount Lawson on the New South Wales border has scorched over 19,000 hectares. A third major fire is also sweeping through the bushland and former gold-mining country centred on the town Ravenswood—near major regional centres Castlemaine and Bendigo—about 120 kilometres northwest of Melbourne.

Up to 300,000 hectares has burned across the state as fire fronts advanced in multiple directions. In total, 36 bushfires continue to burn across the state.

Three people who had been unaccounted for since their home at Longwood East was destroyed yesterday have now been found. One man was found dead in his car last night near Ravenswood, but authorities do not currently believe his death is related to the fire.

According to the Country Fire Authority (CFA), three firefighters have been hospitalised, one with severe hand injuries, another who was hit in the face by a hose and a third who suffered a medical episode. Multiple CFA crews have been overrun by fires and had to enact emergency procedures. In one case, a fire tanker was destroyed, but the crew is safe.

Hundreds of farming properties and homes lie in ruins and more than 90,000 houses and businesses have been left without power.

At the same time, a brutal heatwave is gripping neighbouring state New South Wales, with temperatures exceeding 45°C (113°F) across the state's west, raising the risk of new fire outbreaks, while northeastern state Queensland faces an intensifying cyclone threat as a tropical low off the coast near Townsville threatens to develop into a category one cyclone. These simultaneous crises across eastern Australia underscore the escalating climate extremes confronting working-class communities from one end of the continent to the other.

Longwood and Ruffy lie in undulating grazing and mixed-farming country, while Walwa and Mount Lawson sit in steep, heavily forested country along the Murray River, roughly 400 kilometres northeast of Melbourne. These districts are dominated by sheep and cattle grazing, fodder and cropping farms, pine plantations and small service townships, with scattered lifestyle properties and tourist traffic passing on the main highways between Melbourne, the alpine region and Sydney.

Conditions for a disaster were clearly signalled in advance.

Meteorologists reported that inland districts in rural Victoria hit about 46–47°C (115–117°F) with hot, dry north-westerly winds and very low humidity, producing what Victorian emergency authorities yesterday described as the worst fire danger day since the “Black Summer” bushfires in 2019–20. Blazes have been unpredictable and fast-moving.

A powerful cold front on Friday brought severe thunderstorms and “dry lightning” which ignited dozens of new fires across the state in a matter of hours.

Ruffy, a tiny hamlet that survives on farming and a handful of small businesses, was turned into “a disaster zone” on Thursday and Friday. At least 20 homes and the school were destroyed.

Local CFA captain George Noye said in an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that it was “like a bomb's gone off” in the main street, after embers and spot fires rained down and overwhelmed defences.

“Some properties have lost everything,” Noye said. “They've lost their livelihoods, they've lost their shearing sheds, livestock, just absolutely devastating.”

Despite the obvious and long-foreseen danger, the Labor administration in Victoria and the federal Labor government stand exposed as utterly unprepared and unwilling to provide the resources necessary to prevent such a disaster.

Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan waited until the night of January 9, after firestorms had already devastated communities, to declare a “state of disaster” in 18 local government areas and one alpine resort. This measure grants emergency powers to control movement, seize property and order evacuations but does nothing to remedy the chronic underfunding and casualisation of fire services, health care, power infrastructure

and regional planning.

On the ground, hundreds of largely volunteer firefighters have been thrown into battle against dozens of blazes with limited equipment, at times without support from the state's 70 water-bombing aircraft because winds were too strong for them to fly.

What is now unfolding is not an unavoidable "natural disaster" but the foreseeable outcome of policies that place corporate profits ahead of the lives and homes of working people.

Scientists and fire authorities warned that spring rainfall and vegetation growth would swiftly evolve into a highly combustible state in January, and that the 2025–26 season would see more frequent and severe bushfires as climate change intensified heat and drought across south-eastern Australia.

Around the world, wildfires are increasing in scale, severity and frequency to higher average global temperatures. In the past year alone, massive fires have devastated North America, Japan, South Korea, the Mediterranean and Turkey.

Yet communities have been left with ageing power and road infrastructure, inadequate local health and evacuation facilities, and volunteer fire brigades forced to stretch limited tankers and crews across vast areas of highly flammable grassland and forest.

The three missing residents at Longwood East were advised to shelter in their home as the firestorm approached, a tragic expression of a system where the state cannot or will not guarantee timely, organised evacuation and safe refuge for all.

More than a decade of catastrophic bushfires has already demonstrated the deadly consequences of leaving emergency services under-resourced and subordinated to the profit system. In February 2009, the Black Saturday fires in Victoria killed 173 people, destroyed more than 2,000 homes and razed entire townships such as Marysville and Kinglake in a single afternoon. Many of those who perished did so after being told to "stay and defend" inadequately prepared properties under conditions that were, in reality, impossible for any household to withstand.

Reviews and royal commissions documented not only individual errors but systemic failures: insufficient fuel-reduction and mitigation in known high-risk areas, degraded power infrastructure, limited warning systems and a chronic dependence on volunteer brigades trying to hold back megafires with outdated equipment.

The 2019–2020 "Black Summer" fires took this pattern to a national scale. Over that season, blazes burned an estimated 24 million hectares across Australia, destroyed around 3,000 homes and killed at least 33 people directly, with thousands more suffering from smoke-related illness.

Much of eastern Victoria and southern New South Wales—including regions not far from the present Walwa and Mount Lawson firegrounds—was engulfed in weeks-long

infernos that forced mass evacuations and exposed the inability of state and federal governments to coordinate basic logistics such as fuel, food and medical support for isolated communities.

Scientists and firefighters repeatedly warned that climate change, driven above all by the continued burning of coal, oil and gas, was lengthening fire seasons, drying forests and making extreme fire weather more frequent, yet official policy remained dominated by the defence of fossil-fuel profits and tokenistic emissions targets.

Northeastern Victoria has a long and grim history of such disasters. Twentieth-century fires in this region—including the 1939 "Black Friday" fires and later outbreaks in the 1950s, 1960s and the 2003 alpine fires—repeatedly swept through mountain forests, river valleys and grazing country, killing residents, stock and firefighters and destroying sawmills, farms and small settlements.

Each catastrophe produced official inquiries, recommendations and solemn promises of reform, yet the underlying pattern has persisted: Mitigation, planning and emergency capacity are pared back under the dictates of austerity, "efficiency dividends" and privatisation.

This historical record underscores the urgent necessity for a fundamentally different approach. A genuinely effective bushfire strategy would require a permanently and generously funded full-time emergency service, with modern equipment and staffing levels sufficient to protect all fire-prone communities, not just major tourist or agribusiness assets.

It would integrate large-scale hazard-reduction and land-use planning, massive investment in resilient public infrastructure and housing, and serious, binding measures to phase out fossil fuels and address the climate crisis that is making each fire season more lethal than the last. Such a program is impossible within a capitalist framework in which every major decision—from energy policy to local fire-service budgets—is subordinated to the profit requirements of banks, energy conglomerates and developers.

What is required is socialist planning on a global scale: the democratic control of the economy by the working class, so that society's vast productive resources can be redirected from military spending, fossil-fuel expansion and corporate enrichment to protecting human life and the environment. Only on this basis can a comprehensive system of fire mitigation, emergency response and climate action be developed that corresponds to the real scale of the danger confronting ordinary people in Victoria, across Australia and around the world.



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