

# Anger in Australia's fire zones as government underfunding and negligence exposed

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Anger is mounting across fire-hit communities in Victoria as the state and federal Labor governments respond to the state's worst bushfire disaster since the 2019–2020 Black Summer with token payments, bureaucratic obstacles and the announcement of yet another inquiry.

Residents, farmers and firefighters who have lost homes, sheds, stock and livelihoods are being told to wait for reviews and navigate complex compensation eligibility rules, while the political establishment works to smother any examination of its responsibility for the catastrophe.

At least 410,000 hectares (ha) have now burned across Victoria—an area nearly six times the size of Singapore—with more than 1,000 structures, including nearly 300 homes, destroyed in the January fires. The fire centred on Walwa has burned nearly 600,000 ha across Victoria and neighbouring New South Wales.

The Longwood blaze alone has scorched more than 140,000 ha and destroyed about 150 structures. Thousands of firefighters and more than 70 aircraft are still engaged in controlling dozens of fires as the state prepares for another heatwave this weekend. So far, there is one confirmed death—Longwood cattle farmer Max Hobson.

Behind these numbers are ordinary farmers, workers and rural residents failed by government inaction and indifference.

In the central Victorian town Alexandra, volunteer firefighter Sam Fawke dedicated a week to combating the fires with the Country Fire Authority (CFA), only to discover he was ineligible for the state's \$680 hardship payment because he had not evacuated.

"I stayed behind and basically was in the fire station or out on fire calls for an average on 14 hours each day minimum," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). "It's not like we've just been wandering around. ... It feels a bit rough."

Arie Eddy was told by the CFA that his rented home at Whiteheads Creek had been destroyed, but Services Australia initially denied him the federal \$1,000 disaster payment because his street was not within the original activation map.

"We found out on Friday that the house and all of our belongings have unfortunately perished in the fire. ... To be told that we're not eligible for disaster payments for a bushfire that we lost our house in is extremely difficult, it was quite

upsetting and quite infuriating to be honest," he said.

Investigators believe the Longwood fire began when a trailer travelling on the Hume Freeway—the main arterial roadway between Australia's largest cities Melbourne and Sydney—released sparks that ignited the bone-dry scrub along the roadside near Longwood. Temperatures over 40° Celsius (104° Fahrenheit), dry conditions and strong winds led to a blaze that tore through towns, hamlets and farms in the state's centre.

Councils and fire authorities had publicly warned of a growing fire risk along major freeways, yet the verge near Longwood remained lined with highly flammable grass that a single mechanical fault could ignite.

Whatever the immediate cause of ignition, the megafire was the product of years of inadequate fuel management and emergency response capacity, overseen by successive Labor and Coalition state and federal governments.

Faced with rising criticism, Victorian state Labor premier Jacinta Allan has promised to ask the Inspector-General for Emergency Management to conduct a formal review of the 2025–26 fire season once the immediate crisis passes.

This comes on top of Royal Commissions and inquiries after Black Friday 1939, Ash Wednesday 1983, Black Saturday 2009 and Black Summer 2019–20. All produced recommendations on resourcing, fuel management, communications and warning systems that were partially implemented, selectively adopted or simply ignored when they clashed with budget cuts, privatisations and fossil-fuel expansion.

Another inquiry is not a solution but a smokescreen: a mechanism to channel anger into years of hearings and reports, while the same underlying policies remain untouched.

The question of CFA funding sits at the centre of this. Volunteer brigades went into the 2025–26 season with a fleet in which a significant proportion of trucks are more than 25–30 years old, lacking basic safety features, crew protection and off-road capability. Firefighters' groups estimate that around one-third of CFA operational vehicles have been purchased not by the state, but by communities themselves through donations and fundraising. Now, the Allan government points to 167 new trucks "on order or in production" as proof of investment—an admission in itself that the fleet was known to be dangerously

outdated when the fires began.

A belated CFA annual report, however, has shredded the Allan government's claims of "record" funding and exposed a deep, ongoing erosion of Victoria's frontline fire service in real terms. Unlike previous years, the 2024–25 report was only tabled and released in mid-January—after the bushfire crisis had erupted and criticism over CFA funding intensified—prompting accusations that it was withheld because it revealed serious financial shortfalls.

The report shows government grants rising to \$361.3 million, yet the CFA still ran a \$50.5 million operating deficit on \$529.2 million of spending, with cumulative losses since 2020 above \$145 million. This is because of rising inflation and workloads—CFA brigades turned out to 36 percent more incidents in 2024–25 than in 2020–21. This means "real" funding has fallen by roughly 14 percent.

There is genuine concern among firefighters and community members, but this is being stifled by the organisations which claim to represent them.

Organisations like the United Firefighters Union (UFU), the CFA Volunteers Group and the Across Victoria Alliance (AVA) have issued statements calling the fires "foreseeable and preventable," pointing to "years of government underinvestment in fire services, ageing fire trucks and ignored warnings from firefighters" and demanding a parliamentary inquiry.

But they remain confined within the framework of defending the existing, volunteer-centred CFA model, bargaining within Labor's budget constraints for career firefighters and jockeying over how the Fire Services Property Levy is carved up, rather than challenging the class priorities that keep overall funding so low. This is highlighted by their call for yet another inquiry.

None of them calls for what is actually required: a modern fleet, full-time professional crews across rural Victoria and national aerial firefighting capacity.

The same is true, in an even more blatant form, of the right-wing political and media opposition. National MPs, Liberal figures and conservative outlets like Sky News and *Quadrant* attack Labor over CFA funding and "green ideology," claiming that the fires are the result of excessive environmental regulation. They posture as defenders of volunteers and farmers, yet they deny or downplay the role of climate change and staunchly defend the coal and gas industries whose emissions are driving more frequent, more intense heatwaves and fire seasons.

Their solution is to slash "green tape" and expand logging, land clearing and hazard-reduction operations, regardless of ecological consequences, while leaving intact the reliance on unpaid volunteer labour and strangled public budgets. They offer rural communities nothing but a different mix of the same policies: more concessions to agribusiness and fossil-fuel corporations, more austerity for public services, and more inquiries when the next disaster arrives.

For decades, inquiry after inquiry has documented the same issues: inadequate truck fleets and radios; fragmented command structures; dangerous fuel build-up in and around communities; fragile rural health and evacuation systems; and, increasingly, the impact of a warming climate on fire weather. Yet the response of Labor and Coalition governments alike has been to tinker at the edges while maintaining the fundamental subordination of every aspect of social life, including disaster preparedness, to the demands of private profit.

The Albanese government's much-heralded Disaster Ready Fund has poured hundreds of millions into scattered mitigation projects, criticised by the National Audit Office for opaque and flawed funding decisions, while doing nothing to expand frontline firefighting capacity.

Workers, rural residents and farmers have every reason to approach Allan's promised review, and the entire political establishment, with deep distrust and contempt.

Successive governments have demonstrated that they will not defend the homes, livelihoods or lives of ordinary people when doing so conflicts with budget surpluses, defence spending and the profits of banks, energy conglomerates and agribusiness. The tragedy of the Longwood fire shows that under capitalism even the most basic preventative measures are sacrificed to cost-cutting.

The fight for genuine fire readiness, adequate support and serious climate action cannot be left in the hands of those who created this disaster.

It must be taken up independently by workers and small farmers themselves: organising across communities to demand and enforce the redirection of resources from corporate wealth and the military to social defence—professional fire and emergency services, safe housing, resilient infrastructure and ecologically sound land management.

That, in turn, requires a conscious political struggle against the entire capitalist system and for socialist planning, in which the economy is democratically controlled by the working class and the protection of human life and the natural environment takes precedence over profit. Only on this basis can Victoria, other Australian states and the world prepare for and prevent the fires and climate shocks that capitalism is unleashing.



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