

Fire spreads in Victoria as heatwave grips Australia's south east, air quality plummets

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A bushfire in Victoria's Otways region has opened a new and highly dangerous front in the state's ongoing disaster, forcing mass evacuations, destroying homes and blanketing parts of southern Australia in choking smoke as a severe late-January heatwave grips the southeast of the continent.

The Carlisle River fire, burning in steep forest more than 150 kilometres southwest of Melbourne, has become the latest expression of a system that leaves regional communities exposed to escalating climate extremes with inadequate resources, belated warnings and threadbare national support.

The blaze began on 10 January but surged into a major emergency from 24 January, when temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius (104°F) and strong winds drove it out of containment lines toward the small town of Gellibrand.

By 28 January the fire had grown to more than 11,000 hectares, with multiple active fingers running through native forest, plantations and farmland in the Greater Otways.

Authorities issued evacuation or "leave now" orders for more than 1,100 properties, encompassing Gellibrand, Kewar, Beech Forest, Forrest, Barongarook and other townships and farms on the northern flank of the Great Otway National Park.

Damage assessments are still underway, but early tallies confirm at least 16 structures destroyed around Gellibrand, including farm buildings and at least eight family homes, with further losses of sheds, fencing and livestock on properties near Larralea and Lismore. In Larralea, the same system destroyed two structures and killed animals on ten properties as spot fires jumped ahead of the main front.

So far there are no confirmed deaths from the Otways fires, but tens of thousands across western and southwestern Victoria have faced blackouts, toxic smoke, forced evacuations and the continuing threat of renewed fire runs as conditions shift.

This inferno is tearing through a region that only days earlier had been hit by destructive flash flooding, underscoring the "whiplash" character of climate-driven extremes now confronting Victoria.

On 15 January, a "rain bomb" dumped up to 180 millimetres of rain in under five hours across the Otways, a tourist hotspot on the Great Ocean Road, turning creeks into torrents that smashed bridges, swept cars into the sea and inundated caravan parks and holiday accommodation. Hundreds were evacuated from Lorne, Wye River and Apollo Bay as the highway closed and disaster assistance was belatedly activated, leaving communities still clearing silt and repairing roads now told to flee again or face a megafire.

Fire authorities themselves concede that they do not expect to contain the Otways blaze quickly.

Country Fire Authority (CFA) state response controller Jason Heffernan told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation earlier this week that it could be up to eight days before conditions ease enough for crews to gain the upper hand. "Conditions will be very challenging," he said. "We are very concerned about the Carlisle River fire and communities surrounding that fire."

The Otways disaster is unfolding amid an intense seven-day heatwave engulfing south eastern Australia, pushing temperatures above 40 degrees across vast areas of Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales alongside erratic winds and dry thunderstorms sharply increasing fire danger. On January 27, Victoria's highest ever recorded temperature of 48.9°C (120°F) was reached at Walpeup in the state's east.

The Bureau of Meteorology has warned that the heatwave is "prolonged and severe," with very low humidity and hot, gusty winds combining to create conditions similar to those preceding the 2009 Black Saturday fires which were Australia's deadliest bushfire, killing 173 people, destroying nearly 2,000 homes and burning 450,000 hectares across Victoria.

Another consequence of the new blaze has been hazardous air quality over a wide region.

Smoke from the Otways, mixed with residual smoke from ongoing fires in Longwood and Walwa, has drifted across Geelong, Melbourne, the Mornington Peninsula and parts of

Gippsland in the state's east, with the Victorian Environment Protection Authority repeatedly rating air quality as "very poor" or "extremely poor" for several days.

Residents in coastal towns and Melbourne's western and southern suburbs reported ash falling from the sky. People across the state, including the biggest cities Melbourne and Geelong, were warned that children, the elderly and people with heart or lung conditions should remain indoors and avoid strenuous activity as particulate concentrations spike.

In the Otways themselves, thick smoke has repeatedly grounded aircraft and limited visibility, hampering both aerial firefighting and impact assessment.

The state Labor government of Premier Jacinta Allan has responded with the same mixture of press conferences, limited relief payments and promises of reviews that accompanied the earlier January fires in Longwood, Walwa and central Victoria.

Allan reiterated evacuation advice and pointed to hardship payments and recovery grants already announced in mid-month, but there has been no substantial, Otways-specific expansion of front-line capacity beyond redeploying existing volunteer-based CFA and Forest Fire Management crews into yet another major campaign as fires rage in five districts across the state.

At the federal level, Emergency Management Minister Kristy McBain has announced that Canberra deployed a Black Hawk helicopter to assist aerial firefighting and provided Australian Defence Force ration packs to firefighters. Additional firefighters from other states and territories, and teams from New Zealand and Canada already in Victoria, have been directed to support operations in the Otways under mutual-aid arrangements.

This is the sum of the so-called national response: a single military helicopter, rations, and the redistribution of the same overstretched workforce across multiple fronts weeks after the fires first began.

There is still no permanent, federally owned national aerial firefighting fleet or unified professional bushfire service; instead, aircraft and personnel are stitched together each season, leaving communities like Gellibrand and Lismore dependent on a fragile patchwork at the height of the most dangerous conditions.

More than 400,000 hectares have burned across Victoria this month, destroying about 400 homes, mostly in the state's centre. These are being presented by the political establishment as an unavoidable "natural disaster" driven by extreme weather beyond human control. This is a conscious lie. The disaster unfolding across Victoria is the entirely mitigatable and preventable outcome of decades of government refusal to act on climate change or commit adequate resources to fire preparation.

Federal Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments have presided over the continued expansion of coal and gas exports, refusing binding emissions reductions despite scientific warnings that Australia's fire seasons are being lengthened and intensified by climate change. At the state level, successive Labor and Coalition administrations have starved CFA and Forest Fire Management of resources, left major highways and roadsides clogged with flammable vegetation, failed to upgrade aging fire trucks and equipment, and kept frontline firefighting dependent on unpaid volunteers even as the season grows more severe.

Facing mounting anger, Allan has promised a formal review by the Inspector-General for Emergency Management into the 2025–26 bushfire season, to commence once the current crisis passes. This will be a smokescreen, following an identical pattern to previous inquiries: months or years of hearings and expert testimony, lengthy reports with dozens of recommendations on resourcing, land management and coordination, and then systematic implementation failures as each recommendation clashes with austerity budgets, privatisation and the profit interests of banks and corporations.

The protection of communities in fire-prone regions, the defence of agricultural land, native forests and natural ecosystems, and genuine action on climate change cannot be achieved within capitalism's profit-driven framework. They require the expropriation of the energy corporations, banks and agribusiness interests that dictate government policy, and the establishment of a workers' government committed to socialist planning. Only then can resources be democratically redirected from military spending and corporate enrichment to the comprehensive fire protection, climate action, and resilient infrastructure that the lives and futures of ordinary people in Victoria and across the world demand.



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