

Bushfires in Australia: Another symptom of climate change

By Frank Gaglioti
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The spring season has started in Australia with unprecedented bushfires devastating rural areas in Queensland and New South Wales (NSW). The fires, driven by extreme weather and drought conditions, have affected large swathes of the landscape, destroying homes and livelihoods.

From early September, blazes hit part of the Gold Coast hinterland in southeast Queensland and the Sunshine Coast, 100 kilometres north of the state capital, Brisbane, as well as the southern Granite Belt region. About 15,000 hectares were burnt out across the state over a week, fanned by strong winds.

Several homes were destroyed at Peregian Beach on the Sunshine Coast, where the police declared a state of emergency. At the height of the crisis, hundreds of residents were forced to abandon their homes and flee to evacuation centres.

Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) North Coast Chief Superintendent Michelle Young told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that fast winds fanned ember attacks at least two kilometres ahead of fires, threatening areas from Peregian Beach to Marcus Beach.

Young said wind gusts of 50 kilometres per hour caused embers to travel huge distances, sparking spot fires because of the dry conditions. Residents at Castaways Beach, Sunrise Beach, Sunshine Beach and Noosa Springs were told to prepare to leave their homes.

According to fire authorities, 87 fires were raging across the state, including on the Atherton Tablelands in the far north. Eleven schools had to be closed in the affected areas. Approximately 97 properties suffered damage.

“Those fires went through like a freight train, it was like a plane going past, they were moving so fast,”

Tracey Beggs, a Gold Coast hinterland resident, told the ABC.

The fires in that region ravaged sections of rainforest. This is unprecedented, as these areas were considered too wet to burn. Historic Binna Burra Lodge, located in the rainforest, was largely destroyed, potentially leaving 70 workers out of a job.

Meanwhile, 50 fires were burning across NSW, destroying numbers of homes. Large planes were used to dump fire retardant, while hundreds of firefighters confronted the fires on the ground.

Although more benign conditions have since returned to the fire zones, authorities are warning of a disastrous fire season. Very dry conditions are affecting much of NSW and southern Queensland. Fires are still burning in less accessible areas. Firefighters said that only sustained rainfall will put out these fires, but this is an unlikely occurrence.

QFES Predictive Services Unit Manager Andrew Sturgess said: “It is an historic event. [We’ve] never seen this before in recorded history—fire weather has never been as severe, this early in spring... So this is an omen, if you will—a warning of the fire season that we’re likely to see ahead in the southeastern parts of the state, the driest parts of the state, where most of our population is.”

Scientists are pointing to the significance of the fact that sections of rainforest were burnt out. This is extremely rare, although areas in central Queensland were affected last year. While the dominant eucalypt forests are adapted to fire, as a regular feature of the environment, fire will kill trees outright in rainforests.

Griffith University PhD student Patrick Norman commented: “To my knowledge this hasn’t happened before in the Gold Coast hinterland. It takes 100 to 150 years for sub-tropical rainforest to regrow ... especially

those large emergent trees that stick out over the top of the canopy. So waiting for those trees to get big enough, is a long time.”

Scientists think a number of factors are exacerbating conditions. Recent studies by the Australian Bureau of Meteorology have examined the impact of heightened temperatures in the upper stratosphere above Antarctica, called “sudden stratospheric warming.” This event is predicted to intensify in coming months, causing increased temperatures and a reduction in rainfall.

Another indicator of intensifying fire condition is the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD). Climate scientists examine the IOD for fluctuations in temperatures across the Indian Ocean. Scientists think the Indian Ocean will experience a positive IOD for the next three months, leading to hotter and dryer than usual conditions.

According to 2017 study entitled *Recent Australian droughts may be the worst in 800 years* and cited on *The Conversation* website , scientists looked at ice cores, tree rings and corals in order to determine long-term temperatures. The report stated: “Our new records show that parts of Northern Australia are wetter than ever before, and that major droughts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries in southern Australia are likely without precedent over the past 400 years.”

University of Sydney Professor of Hazards and Disaster Risk Sciences Dale Dominey-Howes, said: “[A]lthough these bushfires are not *directly* attributable to climate change, our rapidly warming climate, driven by human activities, is exacerbating every risk factor for more frequent and intense bushfires.”

Scientists know how to reverse climate change, but the Australian political and corporate elite, in line with their counterparts internationally, have refused to take any significant action to ameliorate, let alone halt, the worsening conditions.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison briefly visited the burnt-out areas in Queensland and dismissed questions on climate change as “one of many factors.” Together with the state Labor government, he basically left the communities to their own devices, offering virtually nothing in aid or assistance.

Greenhouse gases have been rising under successive Liberal-National and Labor Party governments. Although the Greens pay lip service to global warming, their program claims that the problem can be resolved

through the profit-driven market system that caused the crisis in the first place.

The lack of any significant steps toward reducing emissions is the product of capitalism and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states, each pursuing the narrow national interests of their own ruling classes at the expense of the working class and the long-term future of humanity as a whole.

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