

Australian cities bathed in smoke from hundreds of bushfires

By Martin Scott
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The horror early start to Australia's bushfire season has continued this week, with fires burning out of control in the states of New South Wales (NSW), Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria.

Sydney has been enveloped in toxic smoke for days on end as a result of blazes burning to the south, west and north of the city. The NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment reported that air quality was "hazardous" in the city on 12 days last month. At times, smoke haze has caused air quality in both Sydney and Brisbane to rank among the worst in the world.

In the latest flare-ups, the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) issued an emergency warning for a fire burning at Gaspers Mountain, northwest of Sydney. The fire, which has already burnt more than 250,000 hectares, merged with two smaller blazes on Friday morning.

Southwest of Sydney, the Green Wattle Creek fire has consumed more than 45,000 hectares and jumped Lake Burragorang, Sydney's main water supply reservoir. Three firefighters were injured fighting the blaze and had to be airlifted to hospital on Thursday. Press photographers and firefighters described witnessing a spontaneous explosion of bushland on Thursday night that was unlike anything they had seen before.

On the NSW South Coast, a fire originating near Currowan has threatened residents throughout the week. The fire crossed the main coastal Princes Highway on Monday, leaving residents of Depot Beach, Pretty Beach, Pebbly Beach and Bawley Point with no way to leave. The fire has spread over more than 70,000 hectares and destroyed at least one home. While it has been downgraded to "watch and act," residents of the South Durras area have been encouraged to leave.

Less than 100 kilometres inland, a fire in the Tallaganda National Park burnt through more than 30,000 hectares in 10 days. Residents in Braidwood and surrounding areas, not far from Canberra, are still being told to monitor the situation carefully, as hot, dry and windy conditions are forecast for the coming days.

There are currently 100 bush and grass fires burning across NSW, 13 of which carry "emergency" or "watch and act" warnings. Since July, bushfires in the state have scorched more than two million hectares of land, and destroyed more than 680 homes. Six people have been killed.

In southeast Queensland, Cypress Gardens and Forest Ridge were evacuated on Wednesday, threatened by the worst of the 47 fires burning across that state. While the blaze continues, the warning has been downgraded to "watch and act." So far, at least three homes have been lost.

There is no reported immediate threat to human lives from bushfires currently burning in Victoria, but fires in East Gippsland last weekend claimed the life of a 69-year-old worker assisting the firefighting effort when his vehicle rolled down an embankment.

The most serious fire in Western Australia is at Nambeelup, just south of Perth. Although the fire is currently contained, the weather forecast is for strong winds and high temperatures, raising concerns the fire may spread toward built-up areas.

The danger of bushfires is not limited to the immediate vicinity of the fire. Smoke from the fires has travelled as far as New Zealand and South America.

While the sight of ashes falling from the sky is a stark reminder of the ongoing catastrophe, the invisible components of the smoke present a greater threat. Tiny (smaller than 2.5 micrometres) particles in bushfire smoke cause irritation in the eyes and throat, and enter

the bloodstream through the lungs.

The effects are unpleasant for otherwise healthy people, but for sufferers of respiratory illnesses, including asthma, lung cancer and emphysema, or those at risk of heart attack, this level of smoke pollution can be life-threatening.

In NSW, ambulance calls related to asthma or breathing issues are up 30 percent on the weekly average, and emergency presentations are up 25 percent due to the smoke haze.

Smoke-polluted air is also known to cause an increase in the number of people needing medical attention for deep vein thrombosis, complications of diabetes and neurological disorders including Parkinson's disease.

A recent US study found that short-term exposure to fine particulate matter was positively correlated with an increase in deaths and hospital admissions resulting from conditions not previously thought to be related to air pollution, including septicaemia, fluid and electrolyte disorders, renal failure and intestinal obstruction without hernia.

The NSW government has denied reports that its fire services have suffered cuts of up to \$40 million. But it is clear that spending on firefighting personnel and resources is not keeping pace with the impact of climate change, population growth and shoddy construction practises, including flammable cladding on apartment buildings.

Unlike police officers, firefighters are not designated "frontline workers" and are therefore not exempt from the NSW Labour Expense Cap, an austerity measure ordering government agencies to limit promotions, cut overtime payments through increased use of part-time and casual workers, and reduce staff numbers through "natural attrition."

This means greater reliance on volunteers. The annual labour cost for the state's RFS volunteer force is less than \$120 million, in the form of insurance, workers' compensation and a payroll tax exemption for employers while their employees are fighting fires.

As climate change increases the number and intensity of bushfires, and the length of fire seasons, ever-greater demands are being placed on volunteer firefighters. Former chief executive of the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the Victorian equivalent of the RFS, Neil Bibby, recently told reporters: "Disasters are becoming

bigger and lasting longer, and starting earlier and finishing later in the year... [W]e're coming to the tipping point where the ability to rest people and the ability to do the job the volunteers do is diminishing."

The sustainability of volunteer-based fire services is being further undercut by the ageing of the population. This is exacerbated in rural areas by an exodus of younger people, driven by high unemployment, lack of educational opportunities and the consolidation of small family farms into massive agribusinesses.

Longer working hours, more families with both parents working full-time and increased commute times as a result of inadequate infrastructure and overpriced housing, also leave workers with little time to volunteer for fire fighting.

Nonetheless, thousands of workers still come forward, saving countless lives and homes. The bravery and generosity displayed by ordinary people in times of crisis stand in sharp contrast to the response of capitalist governments, which put the profit interests of big business and tax cuts for the wealthy ahead of the health and safety of people and the environment.

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