

Australian bushfire victims still suffering six months on

By Cheryl Crisp
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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) recently aired on its flagship program “Four Corners” a revealing segment titled *Hard Winter*. It outlined the harsh conditions still facing many victims of the bushfires that raged throughout many parts of the country from last July to January.

The fires, in the worst season on record, killed 34 people, including nine firefighters, three of whom were from the US. The Americans had volunteered to combat the firestorm. The estimated death toll from the toxic air that choked Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra and adjoining regions for weeks is more than ten times greater.

The fires destroyed almost 6,000 buildings, including 3,094 homes, and burned through 18.6 million hectares of land, which is equivalent to more than half the total landmass of the UK.

About 15 million people, or 60 percent of the population, were exposed either directly or indirectly to the infernos and 2.9 million people had their property damaged or threatened or had to evacuate. The livelihoods of thousands of people have been affected or destroyed. The blazes destroyed entire eco systems and reportedly killed up to one billion native animals.

Almost 1,000 international firefighters were deployed to assist Australian crews, along with over 6,300 interstate personnel. More than 20 countries provided aid.

The images of thousands of people stranded on beaches while fires burned their towns and villages will be forever etched in the consciousness of millions of people worldwide.

The “Four Corners” report centred on the small town of Cobargo, south of Sydney, which was gutted in a New Year’s Eve fire. Six months on, hundreds of people who lost their homes, and in some cases

everything they owned, are still living in tents, caravans or shipping containers in what is now the dead of winter, with temperatures dropping below zero. Some have no running water and are living through handouts of food, clothing and blankets donated by people throughout Australia and internationally.

Despite a reported \$500 million raised in donations through charities, agencies and governments, many of the farmers and local residents are yet to have their properties cleared of burnt out debris and the remains of their houses, stockyards, sheds, vehicles and machinery. The Cobargo region has 2,000 burned buildings to be cleared, with more than 32,000 tonnes of material contaminated with asbestos. As of July 3, the fire-gutted main street of Cobargo had only just been cleared.

Hard Winter opened with the delivery of 207 1,000-litre water tanks to be distributed to some of the bushfire victims. For Cathy Healy and Rachel Hatton, like hundreds of others, this means they can have a shower for the first time since New Year’s Eve. They recounted the daily grind of feeding themselves, their animals and trying to keep warm. “It is just so hard... It is ridiculous. I don’t know how we do it honestly,” Healy said.

Trevor and Ronnie Eagles, who used their superannuation to purchase their farm, described the trauma and grief of listening to the cries of their animals they were unable to save as they fled the inferno. They left everything behind and returned to find their home, sheds and machinery destroyed and many of their stock dead.

Ronnie Eagles related their life, five months on, still living in a caravan loaned to them by a neighbour, with no running water, and a hole in the ground as a toilet. The couple travelled into town every few days to

shower in the public facilities. They are living on donations provided by a relief centre. Uninsured, they have been deemed ineligible for grants to rebuild their property.

Many of those interviewed were not insured or vastly under-insured, due to the high cost of premiums. One farmer, Warren Salway, whose brother Robert and nephew Patrick perished in the fires, lost more than \$1.3 million in infrastructure on his cattle farm. Of the two houses, five sheds, fences, stock yards and 150 cattle burned, only one house and two sheds were insured. Volunteer backpackers were helping rebuild his fences.

Another local, Stephan, whose self-built mud brick house was destroyed, was given just \$50,000 from the Red Cross to rebuild and \$8,000 from the New South Wales state government for appliances. He also was uninsured.

There is general dismay and disgust at the lack of support from the governments and charities.

According to an ABC report, the three major charities—the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul—collected a total of more than \$280 million in bushfire donations but on June 30 still had more than half the funds not distributed to victims. Of the purported \$2 billion promised by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, \$1 billion had been distributed, with almost half as reimbursements to state governments.

Cobargo became the voice of opposition to Morrison and the Liberal-National government during his visit there on January 2. This followed his rushed return from a secret family holiday in Hawaii during mid-December, while the country burned.

In scenes televised around the world, residents and firefighters refused to shake his hand. They demanded that funding be restored to the Rural Fire Service (RFS) and assistance provided to bushfire victims. Morrison's holiday only exemplified the contempt and neglect displayed by governments, Liberal-National and Labor Party alike, for decades.

The Liberal-National government ignored increasingly strident warnings by climate scientists and senior firefighters and emergency personnel that the fire season would be catastrophic due to an ongoing drought and 2019 being the hottest year on record. Despite multiple pleas, Morrison refused to meet with former fire chiefs to develop a plan for the

summer.

Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack described those linking the worsening bushfires to climate change as “inner-city raving lunatics.” Funding cuts to the predominately volunteer firefighting services had left crews with aging and ill-equipped trucks and equipment to combat apocalyptic fires the height of multi-storey buildings.

There was bipartisan support for the government's program with opposition Labor leader Anthony Albanese declaring: “This isn't a party-political point here. This is people doing their best. I'm not seeking to politicise this at all.”

This support for the government was in direct contrast to the anger and concern of millions of people, particularly young people, in Australia and internationally. The 2019 climate-change rallies that spanned the globe were, in Australia, attended by the largest per capita crowds in the world.

The experience of Cobargo residents could be told multiple times in towns and regions throughout the country. The government's contemptuous response to the bushfire threat, driven by the profit interests of the corporate elite, has been replicated in the devastation following the fires.

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