



Australia's wildfire disaster worsens in record-shattering heat

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Image 1. A burning wood chip mill in Eden, New South Wales, Australia, January 6, 2020. No significant rain is expected in the hardest-hit areas of New South Wales and Victoria for months. Photo by: Saeed Khan/AFP

The wildfires in Australia became considerably worse on January 3 and 4. The Australian state of New South Wales was affected the most.

The disaster facing the country is far from over.

Strong, dry winds spread sparks and started new blazes. The fires knocked out power and water in some communities. The government had to call up the military to help with firefighting.

Emergency Warnings

As of January 4, the Rural Fire Service of New South Wales was still giving the most severe level of emergency warnings. "The fire is spreading quickly," said one warning. It told people in some places that it was too late to leave and that they should seek shelter.

Temperatures soared to what appears to be a record high for Sydney. In Penrith, in the far west of the city area, temperatures hit 120 degrees Fahrenheit (48.9 degrees Celsius). Canberra, the nation's capital, reached a record high of 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43.6 degrees Celsius). The previous record of 109 degrees Fahrenheit was set in 1939.

Smoke Creates Dangerous Clouds

Many of the fires sent smoke high into the atmosphere. Some smoke turned into pyrocumulonimbus clouds. These are thunderstorms caused by the heat, smoke and water vapor from a major fire. On January 4, Australia's Bureau of Meteorology issued a thunderstorm warning for storms created by the smoke plumes.

These clouds usually show that a fire is extreme. They help a fire draw in more air and can shift surface winds. This can result in fire tornadoes. A young firefighter in Australia died when a fire tornado overturned his vehicle.

During the night before January 4, fires also erupted in other parts of Australia. A destructive blaze hit Kangaroo Island in South Australia. The island is home to a nature preserve with many unique animals. Fires have destroyed habitats for animals that are found only in Australia, including koalas and rare birds. It will take time to fully know how much harm the fires have had on wildlife.

The wildfires are expected to continue burning for months as Australia entered its dry season. However, the immediate fire weather forecast includes cooler weather. This could help firefighters keep the flames back.

A Very Dry Season

December turned out to be one of the top two hottest months ever recorded in the country. This past year, 2019, was the hottest and driest year on record.

December had the country's hottest day on record as well. Little rain is expected for months in the hard-hit areas of New South Wales and Victoria.

Fires happen regularly during the Australian dry season. However, climate change and natural changes are making the situation worse.

As people burn fossil fuels like coal and gas for energy, greenhouse gases are released in the air. As the amount of gases in the air build over time, the average global temperature rises. This is called climate change.

Climate change, or global warming, is increasing the chances of extreme heat. It is also making wildfires more severe by drying the landscape. Climate studies show that global warming would make heat waves more frequent and severe. They also said warming would boost the number of days with extreme fire danger.

Both of these trends are happening in Australia.



The southern part of Australia has warmed by 2.7 degrees since 1950, said climate scientist Zeke Hausfather. He works at The Breakthrough Institute, which is a research center. The temperature increase in Australia reflects what is happening worldwide.

Weather Pattern Makes Things Worse

The warm and dry year in Australia is also due in part to a weather pattern. It is called the Indian Ocean Dipole. It is a specific pattern of airflow over the Indian Ocean. When it is in its positive phase, there is less rainfall over Australia. It is a natural weather pattern but it has been happening more often because of climate change. The Indian Ocean Dipole has been in its positive phase for the last two years. It has caused drier conditions than usual in many parts of Australia.

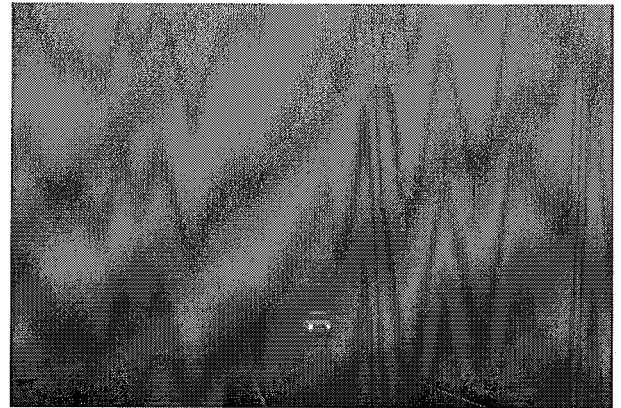
Australians Are Scared And Tired

At least 12 million acres have burned so far in Victoria and New South Wales alone. That amount of land is equal to the burning of the entire state of West Virginia.

Smoke from the fires has made it to South America. There is so much smoke that it may stay in the air for months. This could have a small effect on the planet's climate.

Australians in affected areas feel helpless, scared and tired.

Rebecca Butterworth works in Albury, a city in New South Wales. She said there is a signal that warns people to leave. It's hanging everywhere, she said.



Quiz

1

Read the paragraph from the section "Smoke Creates Dangerous Clouds."

Many of the fires sent smoke high into the atmosphere. Some smoke turned into pyrocumulonimbus clouds. These are thunderstorms caused by the heat, smoke and water vapor from a major fire. On January 4, Australia's Bureau of Meteorology issued a thunderstorm warning for storms created by the smoke plumes.

Which of the following is an accurate explanation of what this paragraph means?

- (A) The fires are large and strong enough to create storms.
- (B) Smoke from the fires is more dangerous than the flames.
- (C) This is the first time a storm has made pyrocumulonimbus clouds.
- (D) Water vapor is being used to put out the fires in Australia.

2

Read the section "Australians Are Scared And Tired."

Which sentence from the section shows that the fires may continue to affect the planet even after they are put out?

- (A) That amount of land is equal to the burning of the entire state of West Virginia.
- (B) Smoke from the fires has made it to South America.
- (C) There is so much smoke that it may stay in the air for months.
- (D) She said there is a signal that warns people to leave.

3

What effect does the Indian Ocean Dipole have on Australia's fires?

- (A) It creates tornadoes that can help the fires to spread more quickly.
- (B) It causes cooler weather that will increase the smoke from the fires.
- (C) It creates dry conditions for big fires by sending less rainfall to Australia.
- (D) It causes Australian fires to be hotter by raising temperatures worldwide.

4

What is the relationship between the fires in Australia and climate change?

- (A) The fires are raising temperatures in Australia, which is what is causing climate change to happen in other places.
- (B) The fires are part of a record hot year in Australia, which is caused in part by climate change raising global temperatures.
- (C) The fires happen every year in Australia, but climate change has been making the fire season there shorter over time.
- (D) The fires happen most often near the islands of Australia, but climate change has caused them to move onto the mainland.