

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > South Pacific > Australia > Disasters - Humanitarian and ecological (Australia) > **Catastrophic bushfires in Australia - Firefighter: 'We are being kicked in (...)**

Catastrophic bushfires in Australia - Firefighter: 'We are being kicked in the teeth by government'

Sunday 19 January 2020, by [HINMAN Pip](#), [McDONALD Shaun](#) (Date first published: 7 January 2020).

As the catastrophic fires raged over several states from late December into early January, Green Left's Pip Hinman asked Shaun McDonald, a professional firefighter currently based in Tasmania about his views. McDonald has been a firefighter for 13 years, fighting fires in three states and territories, including recently being deployed to NSW.



Protesters demanding Scott Morrison act on the bushfires on December 21, 2019. Photo: Zebedee Parkes

Pip Hinman - There is a lot of finger pointing between state and federal governments about who is responsible for what. Regardless, it seems that cost cutting has hampered both professionals and volunteers trying to fight these fires. What do you think should be done both in the short and longer term?

Shaun McDonald - Professional firefighting organisations are crying out for more recruits and more staff. The state governments' Parks and Wildlife Services have had their numbers cut over the last few years through restructuring, redundancy programs and attrition as well as the flat lining of budgets. The NSW government has cut the capital expenditure and recurrent budgets for both the Rural Fire Service and the NSW Fire Brigade. New staff trained as firefighters means that the funds need to be made available.

In the volunteer organisations, people have to deal with aging equipment and substandard personal protective equipment. This is the issue with the substandard smoke masks. Vollies and even professional firefighters are being given inadequate P2 dust masks to fight fires in drier, hotter conditions.

On a fireground, communications are paramount and yet firefighters still turn out with sub-standard radios or, sometimes, without a personal radio.

On the question of volunteer pay there is a divergence in opinion. Some volunteers have been battling for months, missing pay because they have not been going to work as much this season.

Some sort of compensation needs to be made available to those who lose pay through these campaign fires and a wage must be made available to compensate those who aren't working for the time they have spent in extreme conditions away from their family.

The finger pointing takes place at a government level; it's largely absent on the fireground. I don't think the government has a clue what we're going through. We know our organisations are state-based, that it's the state governments or local councils that provide the money. But for the federal government to use that as an excuse to not give badly-needed funds is a kick in the teeth.

The federal government already funds large campaigns against severe and extended fires, so we know the funding avenues are there. They could also fund grants for equipment, or for a decent fleet of dedicated water bomber planes and helicopters or even just an increase in the numbers of professional staff.

Ultimately, climate change is responsible for the ferocity and intensity of the fires in parts of NSW and Victoria. Is this accepted by those you have been working with?

Most firefighters can see that the climate has changed, that it's hotter and drier than it usually was and that the fires have become more ferocious as a result.

We all know that fires have always been around and that we've had some bad ones in the past. But we also know that the weather conditions do not need to be that bad for one to take off now, given how dry the fuel is, or that they will take off like never before in the worst weather conditions.

Firefighters have a very good idea that something needs to be done to address climate change. But they also want to strengthen our organisations so we are better prepared to meet the challenges.

Communication, and the lack of accurate information, has been a major issue. How do we make communities more resilient to a changing climate?

Portable radios, or a radio or TV in the house, are essential. But the messages are usually general and often only relevant just before a fire comes through. The ABC radio network has been crucial in rural areas. The crucial role it plays was reinforced by the Royal Commission into the 2009 Black Saturday fires.

Text messages from emergency agencies are also important, but people need to be more aware of what a near-by fire is doing than what they are hearing on the radio.

One of the big issues for those in rural areas is the lack of mobile coverage, both for phone calls and to enable people to keep up to date with weather or emergency alert apps.

While NBN or ADSL is crucial, it does not replace mobile coverage. This needs to be expanded and black spots around towns or residential clusters need to be eliminated.

After a fire, repairing communications' infrastructure needs to be made a priority. Electricity companies are generally pretty good at restoring power quickly after a bushfire, although it can take days for one transmission line to be repaired if most of the posts have been burnt out.

There probably needs to be a quick response mechanism to power up telecommunications towers after the power dies and once the area is safe. Generators can be choppered in and large ones moved in on a prime mover. Getting the towers working again is very important for many reasons, not least of which is people's health and the rebuilding of their lives and communities.

What are dry lightning storms? Can they be fought?

We can see that changing weather patterns have not just made an area drier and the fuel more volatile, but it is now becoming the cause of some of these fires starting.

Dry lightning is not new, but it has become so much more common in recent years. Storms happen as atmospheric pressure cells move across a landscape, but we are seeing less rain — and sometimes no rain — come through with a trough or a front. When there is rain on the hotter days, it's increasingly not enough to dampen the already very dry fuel.

Up until a few years ago, a Total Fire Ban helped prevent bushfires. Most fires were started accidentally, or through negligence, but a community education campaign about what cannot be done during a Total Fire Ban was effective.

Now, during a hot, dry windy day, the biggest threat is the weather itself. It doesn't matter how a fire starts, if the weather is hot, dry and windy — if the fire danger is in the severe range or higher — it will take off.

But dry lightning gives us one more increasingly major thing to worry about and, in Tasmania at least, we are now expecting some every day in that fire danger range.

There is a freely available smartphone app called My Lightning Tracker (among others) that will give real-time notifications of nearby lightning. Fire agencies would be using more sophisticated technology as well and can map the strikes fairly accurately. But for those out in rural areas, using these apps means better mobile phone coverage is needed.

Are you aware of any moves by firefighter unions to hold a national summit to make demands on the federal government?

No, but it would certainly be a good initiative if the unions held such a summit because we are the ones on the ground.

There have been inquiries held into bushfires after major fire seasons, such as the Royal Commission after the Black Saturday and the 2019 inquiry into the fires in the Tasmanian World Heritage Area.

Unfortunately, these inquiries happen and the recommendations get sat on. The Tasmanian one, for example, said that there needs to be an increase in resources available to the Tasmanian Fire Service and the Parks and Wildlife Service — which includes human resources.

At the very least, governments should be forced to implement the findings of all these inquiries, not just those that are palatable.

Despite calls for help, the NSW government had declined to ask the army in. Is there an issue with firefighters and defence working together?

Whether it's on a fireground, or in an operations room, we are all there to do a job no matter what agency's uniform someone is wearing. There are definitely differences in approach between agencies but in an operation like this, personal and professional egos need to be left at the door.

I don't have a problem with the army supplying units to help the incident management teams' efforts, as part of that team. The army and air force also have their own firefighting crews, which would be useful to help on the ground under the same direction as everyone else.

Can you comment on the length of the bushfire season now compared to previous years?

There are two issues: a longer season affects those putting in time on a fireground and the ability to share stretched resources between states — both material and human.

The NSW bushfires have been going for more than five months. Many people at the Incident Management Team level have been working solely on these fires for that amount of time. Firefighters too, particularly full-time firefighters, have been there since the start.

Volunteer and part-time professional firefighters tend to be heavily involved when a fire is in their area, with occasional trips inter- or intrastate to help out.

The longer seasons mean that more firefighters are working for longer and fatigue sets in a lot earlier. Volunteers also lose more time at work, and income, which places pressures on them, their families and communities.

The impacts are felt across the communities. Tourism is down in NSW, which puts great stress on a tourism-reliant community. Others are needed to work huge hours and through public holidays to provide support for the firefighters.

Our system shares resources between states as the fire season moves down the east coast.

But we are now finding that aircraft as well as interstate firefighters are not available when they used to be. This impacts greatly on our ability to get necessary machinery and on the fatigue levels of firefighters as help from other agencies is reduced as they face their own fire season.

PM Scott Morrison's attempt at catch-up, with the late deployment of the army, does not seem to have dampened down the anger among firefighters and communities. Is that your feeling too?

On the fireground, we feel we're being kicked in the teeth by governments that try to deflect the issue or go on holidays. They lack the will to act — both to support the communities and to act on climate change.

The Coalition government seems to be trying to ride this one out. Its popularity has nosedived, and anger against Scott Morrison is building. But once the cooler season comes, and the danger recedes, the government will look for distractions to shore up their credibility. Right now is definitely the time to talk about the climate crisis, but so is winter.

We need to be able to prepare for the next fire "season" during the cooler months, in case it is as bad or worse. We also need to make sure the government is held to account for its failures.

What other problems come in the wake of these fires?

There are other environmental issues such as the amount of carbon released by these fires. Generally, it was believed that fires are carbon neutral, as the carbon released would, eventually, be absorbed back into the bush. But the extent of these fires means may yet propel us towards another tipping point.

The regeneration of the bush is another. We've always had the belief that the bush will recover, but without sufficient rain, that remains a question. Certainly wet forests that have burnt will not recover as they once were.

While the impact of these fires tends to be seen in rural areas, the changing weather is impacting heavily on cities too, and especially those with health problems and older people who are more vulnerable to heat and smoke. The human cost of ignoring climate change-driven fires is too great. The economic cost is too.

Shaun McDonald, professional firefighter currently based in Tasmania

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<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/firefighter-we-are-being-kicked-teeth-government>

Firefighters union leader: ‘There are no climate sceptics on the end of a fire hose’



United Firefighters Union national president Greg McConville. Photo: Paul Oboohov

United Firefighters Union ACT branch secretary and national president Greg McConville, together with representatives of the local Indigenous community, Farmers for Climate Action and The Greens, addressed the “Our federal government fiddles while Australia burns: Let’s put the heat under them” event outside Parliament House in Canberra on November 25. This is what he had to say.

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Canberra area and pay respect to the elders, past and present, of all Australia’s Indigenous peoples.

As bushfires unleash hell on Earth, we must talk about the climate crisis

California wildfires: Climate change, prison labour and the electric company

When talking about fire, Acknowledgement of Country and people takes on a special resonance. The effective utilisation of fire by Indigenous peoples to shape this country is well documented.

Bearing that in mind, “paying respects” needs to be more than lip service. The challenge we face now is that following colonisation and settlement, we have radically changed the regime of fire management in this country, and we would do well to rebuild it.

Four years ago, on the eve of the Paris Climate talks, I stood here and urged that governments do just that.

In real terms, little has changed since.

Rising bushfire risk

We remain on a trajectory that was succinctly summarised by the Climate Council two weeks ago: “The nature of bushfires in Australia has changed. Bushfire conditions are now more dangerous than in the past, and the risk to people and property has increased.

“For well over 20 years scientists have warned that climate change would increase the risk of extreme bushfires in Australia. This warning was accurate.”

The Climate Council made five key findings, which echoed similar findings in earlier studies:

“1) The catastrophic, unprecedented fire conditions currently affecting New South Wales and Queensland have been aggravated by climate change. Bushfire risk was exacerbated by record breaking drought, very dry fuels and soils and record breaking heat.

“2) Bushfire conditions are now more dangerous than in the past. The risks to people and property have increased and fire seasons have lengthened. It is becoming more dangerous to fight fires in Australia.

“3) The fire season has lengthened so substantially that it has already reduced opportunities for fuel reduction burning. This means it is harder to prepare for worsening conditions.

“4) The costs of fighting fires are increasing. Australia relies on resource sharing arrangements between countries and states and territories within Australia. As seasons overlap and fires become more destructive, governments will be increasingly constrained in their ability to share resources and the costs of tackling fires will increase.

“5) The government must develop an urgent plan to (1) prepare Australian communities, health and emergency services for escalating fire danger; and (2) rapidly phase out the burning of coal, oil and gas which is driving more dangerous fires.”

Extreme weather events

We are not only experiencing increased bushfire risk, but also more extreme weather events, which place an increased demand on emergency services, including fire and rescue services. Some examples of that extreme weather are:

- May 2018: NSW Hunter Valley had snow and bushfires on the same night.
- September 2018: Snowy Mountains highway closed at one end due to bushfire and nearly shut down at the other following snow.
- March 2019: Mt Baw Baw, Victoria, experienced snow within days of its hottest day ever, while bushfires led to evacuations.
- August 2019: This summer, more than 600 wildfires have consumed almost 1 million hectares of forest across Alaska.

Extreme weather events have led to a growing number of emergency responses by firefighters. Productivity Commission data shows that the number of responses by firefighters to “floods, storms, tempests and like events” in the ACT alone, almost doubled from 2008-09 to 2017-18.

It is disappointing to hear remarks, like that of the federal Minister for Emergency Management in September, that “climate change is irrelevant” to the response to bushfires. Longer fire seasons, increasingly unpredictable and changeable weather conditions, hotter temperatures and lower

rainfall all combine to increase the challenges that firefighters face on the fireground.

To make remarks of that kind is to suggest that a “business-as-usual approach” will see us through. Sadly, it’s the “business-as-usual approach” that got us here.

There are two things about firefighters and firefighting that need to be said.

Leading by example

The first is that our members have a philosophy of “leaving the job in better shape than they found it”. The second is that, on their worst day, firefighters still give 100% effort and performance, because if they do not, people will die.

Politicians would do well to match the effort and commitment of firefighters in addressing the very real escalation of fire risks and the very real pain and loss that communities now face.

The problems facing our political leaders require that, like firefighters, they give 100% commitment to leaving things better than they found them.

We have been pointing to these problems for some time. In January 2003, 160,000 hectares, almost 70% of the ACT, and a further 100,000 hectares in neighbouring NSW were burned in devastating bushfires.

A study undertaken by the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research in 2013 found that to deal with climate-related increased bushfire risks, Australia will need to increase the number of firefighters by between 67% and 83% by 2030.

The same study concluded that the ACT will need to increase the number of firefighters by between 75% and 96% over the same period: almost double the current number.

A 2014 Climate Council study found that heatwaves are now hotter, longer and occur more often, and that the number of hot days in Australia has doubled in the past 50 years.

The National Aerial Firefighting Centre sent a proposal on behalf of all states and territories to Canberra in 2017 for an annual increase of \$11 million above its existing \$15 million in funding, but they still have not received an answer.

While aerial firefighting craft are highly important, they are not the only answer: with the Queensland fires several weeks ago, such aircraft were grounded by extreme winds.

United voice

Recently, 23 former fire chiefs united to bring their message to the fore: “It’s exactly as we predicted.

“We’ve seen records broken and the word ‘unprecedented’ used on many occasions.

“Fires are literally off the scale in fire danger in this warming planet.

“This is showing how climate change is supercharging the bushfire problem in Australia, and internationally.”

When you have fire chiefs and the union representing firefighters united on this issue, it gives great weight to the compelling message on climate change and fires and emergencies.

We say to the government that this is what you must do, and you must do it now:

1) Urgently work with state and territory governments to build greater capacity to fight fires nationally. That includes raising the number of firefighters by at least two-thirds by 2030.

2) Reduce emissions. As the Climate Council observed, Australia is not on track to meet even its dismal Paris target of 26-28% below 2005 levels by 2030. We have the solutions at our disposal to tackle climate change: we need to accelerate the transition to renewables and storage technologies, as well as to non-polluting transport, infrastructure and food production. We need the federal government to step up to protect Australian lives from worsening disasters in the future.

To those who, for whatever reason, do not agree with what we have to say about the impact of climate change on fires, we say this: The things we are urging be done will not hurt you. They will help you.

Please listen to us — we are listening to you and our members are serving you in your moments of greatest need. Please, help us to help you.

These problems are real. The threat of climate change to bushfire risks is huge. The resource implications are huge. The need to act on climate change has never been greater. There are no climate sceptics on the end of a fire hose.

Canberra

United Firefighters Union ACT branch secretary and national president Greg McConville

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<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/firefighter-we-are-being-kicked-teeth-government>

P.S.

- Green Left Weekly. November 26, 2019. Issue 1247:
<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/firefighter-we-are-being-kicked-teeth-government>