

# Homes burned but telescopes OK: Bushfire at major observatory

January 14 2013, by Sunanda Creagh

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Bushfires and smoke surround the Siding Spring Observatory in Warrumbungle National Park near Coonabarabran. Credit: AAP Image/NSW RFS

Australia's biggest astronomical observatory was burned in a bushfire near Coonabarabran in Western NSW overnight, threatening over \$100 million worth of research infrastructure and the largest optical telescope in the country.

All 18 staff were safely evacuated from the [Siding Spring Observatory](#) (SSO) in the Warrumbungle Mountains at around 4pm yesterday and the facility will be closed for the next fortnight, according to a [press release](#) issued by the Australian National University, which operates the Observatory.

"The priority at this stage is the safety and wellbeing of staff and their families, a number of whom have lost their homes in the [fire](#)," the university's statement said, adding that among the facilities damaged were the the Lodge that housed visiting, a number of cottages, sheds and the Visitors Centre.

"An initial visual assessment indicated that no telescopes appear to have received major damage, but the impact of the fire on the instruments will not be known until later today," with senior staff and a counsellor scheduled to travel to the site this Wednesday.

While the ANU's assets are covered by insurance, the university is considering an emergency appeal to support affected staff and their families, the statement said.

The telescopes at the SSO include the 3.9m diameter Anglo-Australian Telescope (AAT) of the Australian [Astronomical Observatory](#), the largest [optical telescope](#) in Australia, the ANU's Skymapper telescope and the Uppsala Near Earth Object Survey Telescope.



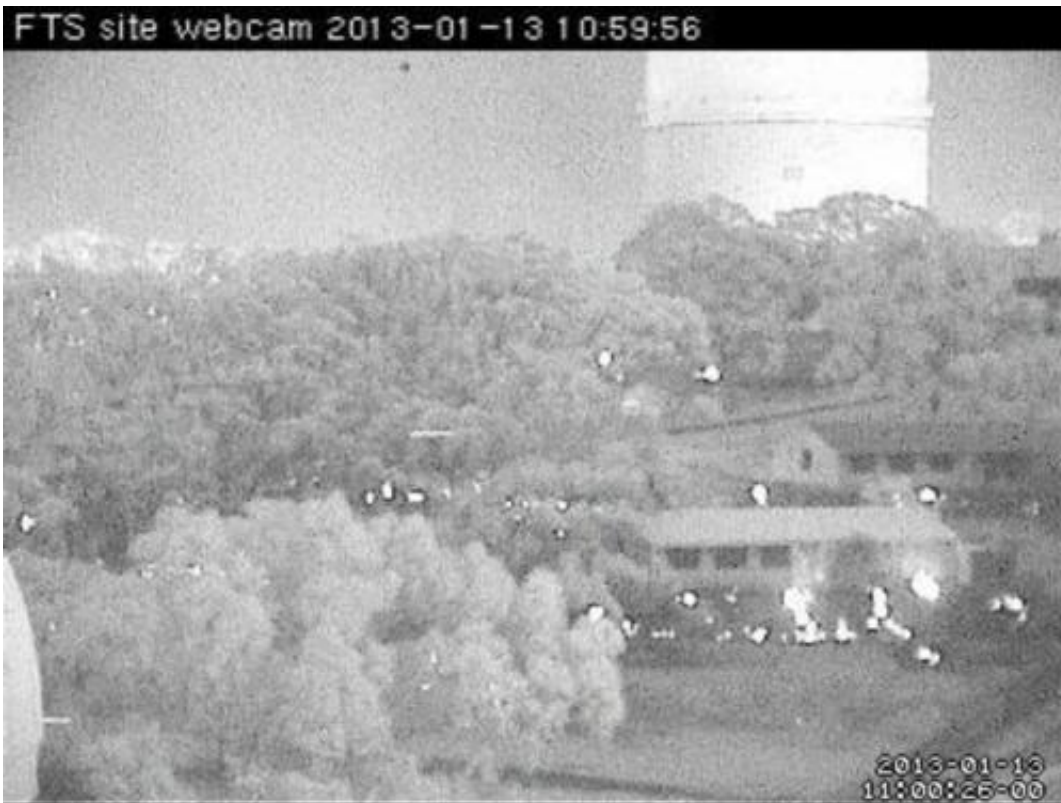
Fire approaches a building at the SSO. Credit: SSO webcam image, LCOGT

ARC Super Science Fellow at the [Australian Astronomical Observatory](#) Dr Amanda Bauer, who uses the 3.9m AAT telescope for her research, said that initial reports from investigators on the ground were that all telescopes survived the fire.

"The telescopes look like they are OK, there's no obvious damage to the outside of the structures," said Dr Bauer, who [live blogged the fire at her personal website](#).

"There were measures taken to protect the facilities, especially in [light of the Mount Stromlo fires 10 years ago](#)," she said, referring to the destruction of the Mount Stromlo Observatory in the 2003 Canberra bushfires.

"There have been some controlled burnings over the last six months that may have helped the situation," said Dr Bauer.



A building in the SSO complex burns. Credit: SSO webcam image, LCOGT

Nobel Prize-winning astronomer and ANU professor Brian Schmidt said that the Skymapper telescope had survived the fire.

"There will certainly be some damage, especially to the conduits and stuff on the outside. I don't I don't think they will be operating tonight," he said.

Dr Schmidt described the SSO as "the nexus of Australian optical astronomy."

"It contains all of our forefront facilities. It's responsible for training probably over half of all Australian astronomy students and there is more than \$100 million worth of infrastructure there," he said, adding that measures taken to minimise the risk from bushfires had helped save the SSO from wholesale devastation.

"It was going through and cleaning out some of the trees, putting fire safe springs on every window, using fire retardant paint everywhere, a whole range of measures," he said.



The bushfire comes closer. Credit: SSO webcam image, LCOGT

Monash University astronomer Dr Michael Brown said that webcams at the site recorded photos of the fire as it approached the Observatory.

"The webcams are normally there to keep an eye on the weather or see if a remotely controlled [telescope](#) has malfunctioned," said Dr Brown.

"Most of those webcams stayed operative as the fire went through but at one stage the Rural Fire Service sent out a message saying don't increase the traffic to those webcams because they were using them to monitor the fire."

Dr Brown said he was "cautiously optimistic" about the state of the telescopes.

"It looks like none of the telescopes burnt down, but it's possible some of them have damage to their wires," he said.

"One of the weather stations reported, at one point, temperatures of 100 degree celsius, but several of the webcams on the site are still functioning."

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