

# Australia turns from defense to offense in wildfire battle

January 12 2020, by Nick Perry

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A firefighter keeps an eye on a controlled fire as they work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

Crews battling Australia's wildfires said Sunday that they have been able

to turn from defense to offense for the first time in weeks thanks to a break in the weather.

Dale McLean, who is helping manage the response to a fire near the town of Bodalla in New South Wales state, was part of team that was bulldozing down [small trees](#) and burning scrub ahead of the fire's projected path to try to stop it from reaching a [major highway](#) by starving it of fuel.

"This fire took a major run about seven or eight days ago, and with the weather changing now, the weather settling down, the fire has settled down," he said. "The fire behavior has changed. So we're able to get in front of the fire now, get on the offensive."

Other workers echoed McLean's comments, saying cooler temperatures and mild winds have finally offered them a chance to make progress. The weather is expected to remain benign for the next week, although any deterioration in conditions after that could see the wildfires flare up again.

While battling the blazes, volunteer firefighting veteran Mick Stain found some moth larvae, or "witchetty grubs," and turned them into what's known in Australia as bush tucker by roasting them directly on the fire's burning coals.



A firefighter kicks at a log while helping to build a containment line at a fire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

"Bit creamy and nutty, but they're all right," Stain said. "They're not spew-worthy, so they're pretty good."

Meanwhile, U.S. tennis star Serena Williams donated her \$43,000 winner's check from New Zealand's ASB Classic to the fundraising appeal for victims of the wildfires, joining many other tennis stars to pledge money, including Ash Barty, Nick Kyrgios, Novak Djokovic and



Maria Sharapova.

Also on Sunday, news came that another firefighter had been killed. Bill Slade—one of the few professionals among mainly volunteer brigades battling blazes across southeast Australia—died after being hit by a falling tree on Saturday near Omeo in eastern Victoria state, Forest Fire Management Victoria Executive Director Chris Hardman said.

The 60-year-old married father of two was commended in November for 40 years of service with the forestry agency.



Flames from a controlled fire burn up tree trunks as firefighters work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that

are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

"Although we do have enormous experience in identifying hazardous trees, sometimes these tree failures can't be predicted," Hardman said. "Working on the fire ground in a forest environment is a dynamic, high-risk environment and it carries with it significant risk."

The tragedy brings the death toll to at least 27 in a crisis that has destroyed more than 2,000 homes and scorched an area larger than the U.S. state of Indiana since September. Four of the casualties have been firefighters.

The crisis has brought accusations that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's conservative government needs to take more action to counter climate change, which experts say has worsened the blazes. Thousands of protesters rallied Friday in Sydney and Melbourne, calling for Morrison to be fired and for Australia to take tougher action on global warming.



Firefighter Mick Stain eats a moth larvae called a witchetty grub as he helps patrol a controlled fire as they work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

The prime minister said Sunday that his government was building resilience to the fire danger posed by climate change.

He said the government was developing a national disaster risk reduction framework within the Department of Home Affairs that will deal with wildfires, cyclones, floods and drought.

"This is a longer-term risk framework model which deals with one of the



big issues in response to the climate changing," Morrison said.

He said his government accepted that climate change was leading to longer, hotter and drier summers, despite junior government lawmaker George Christensen posting on social media over the weekend that the cause of the latest fires was arson rather than man-made climate change. Another junior lawmaker, Craig Kelly, has also publicly denied any link between [climate change](#) and fire crisis.



A firefighter patrols a controlled fire as they work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)



A firefighter patrols a controlled fire as they work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)





A bulldozer operated by the Forestry Corporation works at building a containment line at a fire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)



Forestry Corporation workers Dale McLean, right, and Holly James eat a moth larvae called a witchetty grub offered to them by firefighter Mick Stain, center, as they help patrol a controlled fire as they work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)





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Firefighters patrol a controlled fire as they work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)



A bulldozer operator that goes by the name "Emu" climbs on his dozer as he works at building a containment line at a fire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)





Forestry Corporation worker Dale McLean patrols a controlled fire as they work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)





Forestry Corporation worker Holly James keeps an eye on a controlled fire set to help build a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)



Flames from a controlled fire burn around trees as firefighters work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Sunday, Jan. 12, 2020. Authorities are using relatively benign conditions forecast in southeast Australia for a week or more to consolidate containment lines around scores of fires that are likely to burn for weeks without heavy rainfall. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

State authorities have said a minority of fires are deliberately lit.

"The government's policy is set by the Cabinet. Our party room has a broad range of views," Morrison said of those within government ranks who reject mainstream climate science.

Morrison also announced that 76 million Australian dollars (\$52 million) would be spent on providing psychological counseling for firefighters

and fire-affected communities as part of a previously announced AU\$2 billion (\$1.4 billion) recovery fund.

"There has been a deep scar in the landscape that has been left right across our country," Morrison said. "But I am also very mindful, as is the government, of the very real scars that will be there for quite a period of time to come for those who've been exposed to the trauma of these bushfires."

While the [fire](#) threat is most acute in rural communities, wildfire smoke that has choked some of Australia's largest cities is a reminder to many urban Australians of the unfolding disaster.

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