

Australia girds for worst as bushfire season comes early

9 September 2019



Drought and strong winds have turned swathes of Queensland and New South Wales to tinder

Australia battled to contain around 160 bushfires in the east of the country Monday, an early start to a wildfire season that authorities warn could be the worst in decades.

Drought and [strong winds](#) have turned swathes of Queensland and New South Wales to tinder, prompting fires that have already damaged dozens of buildings and forced thousands of people to evacuate.

Australia's hot, [dry climate](#) makes bushfires a regular occurrence, but scientists say [climate change](#) is making conditions ever-more combustible.

Government-backed researchers have already predicted the next six months of southern hemisphere spring and summer have "the potential to be an active season" because of a very warm and dry start to the year.

Queensland Fire and Emergency Services assistant commissioner Brad Commens told AFP the early bushfire season had caught authorities off-guard.

Many of his staff would ordinarily be working on planning and preparation this early in September, but they have been called to action instead.

"At this point, we're fairly early in the [fire](#) season so it's difficult to predict how long this will go on for, but it's certainly not what I've seen over the last 30 years," he said.

"Without significant rain or without a significant weather change, I think we're in for the long haul."

The fire [season](#) usually starts in the far north of Queensland in September and slowly progresses down Australia's eastern states, hitting New South Wales around Christmas, and Victoria and Tasmania in January and February.

But it is already hitting southern Queensland and New South Wales—where there are 70 fires and 99 percent of the state was declared in drought last May.

On Friday, a fire tore through the small town of Tenterfield, destroying around 25 buildings including five houses.

The town's mayor, Pete Petty, told AFP it was "horrific" to see parts of the town burning. "The townspeople were in shock. It was like being in an apocalypse."

Like scientists, Petty fears this is just the beginning. "We're in the middle of the worst drought in living memory," he said.

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