

## Climate Change : Climate Impacts

### Australian Bushfires: Changing Climate Fans The Flames

**The continent's worst natural disaster in more than a hundred years has claimed nearly 200 lives and left thousands homeless. In the wake of the tragedy, the search for the causes begins.**



A bushfire burns through a forest on the outskirts of Labertouche, east of Melbourne (Photo: Reuters)

Australia's recent bushfires were the continent's worst natural disaster in a century. Wildfires in the southern Australian state of Victoria wiped out entire towns, destroyed more than 1,800 houses and left 7,000 people homeless. More than 200 people died.

Opinions differ on how the fires started. Police have arrested alleged arsonists, while local courts are investigating a local utility, SP AusNet, which provides electricity to areas of Victoria affected by the disaster. One of the company's power lines collapsed and may have sparked some of the fires.

In a different setting, none of these events could have triggered such a terrible catastrophe, but the weather preceding the Victorian bushfires was extreme, nearly one week of maximum daily temperatures in excess of 45 degrees Celsius. Even at night temperatures never dropped below 30 degrees. Melbourne even recorded its hottest day ever.

"These conditions meant the bush was tinder dry and large areas of the State were on Extreme Fire Alert," says Nicholas Scofield, General Manager Corporate Affairs at Allianz Australia.

Scientists are always wary of linking such extreme weather events to climate change, but there is ample evidence that global warming is at least partially to blame.

As early as 2007, scientists from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported with "high confidence" that Australia and New Zealand were already experiencing impacts from recent climate change. "Heat waves and fires are almost certain to increase in intensity and frequency," they stated in the Fourth Assessment Report.



### Picture Gallery (click on the image to start)

Australia experienced its worst natural disaster in decades. Find out why (Photo: Reuters)

A more personal view of the changes comes from climate activist Tim Flannery, an Australian biologist and zoologist from the University of Macquarie. "The long, wet and cold winters that seemed so insufferable to me as a young boy wishing to play outside vanished decades ago," he writes in an article in the Guardian, "and for the past 12 years a new, drier climate has established itself."

Flannery's assessment finds a sad illustration in [the state of Australia's most important river](#). After more than a decade of drought, the Murray River has lost much of its water. The last two years have seen the lowest inflows into the Murray since records began 116 years ago.

In an area with little rainfall but relatively intensive agriculture, the Murray-Darling River Basin is a lifeline for many communities. To adapt, many local communities have started building dams and rationing water.

But if the IPCC assessment is anything to go by, the recent fires have only been a taste of what is to come.

The panel predicts a tendency for decreased annual rainfall over most of southern and sub-tropical Australia and up to 20 percent more droughts over most of Australia by 2030. As a result, fire danger in Australia will increase. Bushfires will happen more often, with increased intensity and they will spread faster, the IPCC says.

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Every summer hundreds of natural wildfires spring up across Australia. Even if this time arsonists or faulty power lines triggered the fires, a changing climate has fanned the flames and turned a natural event into a disaster.

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