Information bulletin
Australia: Bushfires

Glide n° WF-2019-000183-AUS

Date of issue: 16 January 2020

Date of disaster: From November 2019

Point of contact: Simon Rickard, National Operations Manager

Operation start date: 7 November 2019

Expected timeframe: Minimum 5 months

Category of disaster: Orange

Host National Society: Australian Red Cross

Number of people affected: TBC

Number of people to be assisted: TBC

N° of National Societies currently involved in the operation (if available and relevant): N/A

N° of other partner organizations involved in the operation (if available and relevant): N/A

This bulletin is being issued for information only and reflects the current situation and details available at this time. Australian Red Cross is extremely grateful for the huge outpouring of support from people within Australia and abroad. Australian Red Cross is accepting donations to the Red Cross Disaster Relief and Recovery Fund which helps our national emergency teams to do their work – including the bushfires and heatwaves we’re currently seeing and disasters yet to come. At this time, Australian Red Cross is not seeking other forms of assistance from our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners for the bushfire operation.

The situation

High temperatures and prolonged dry conditions have resulted in unprecedented bushfire activity across the states of New South Wales (NSW) since early November 2019, in Victoria (VIC), Western Australia (WA) and South Australia (SA) since early December 2019, and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in January 2020. At least 29 people have died as a result of the bushfires and the impact upon air quality is estimated to be affecting millions. The bushfires continue to burn through an estimated 10.7 million hectares across Australia, destroying bush and farmland, and multiple towns. An estimated 5,900 residential and public structures have been destroyed. Loss of wildlife is estimated to have surpassed one billion losses, along with tens of thousands of livestock. Due to prevailing drought conditions over all affected states during 2019, agricultural and horticultural sectors will be impacted well into the long-term. Due to the changeable nature of this crisis, rapid assessments are ongoing and all reported figures are expected to change as the situation evolves.

The intensity and size of bushfires in some areas has led to the creation of their own weather systems, generating pyrocumulonimbus clouds, trapping heat and generating strong wind and lightning strikes, in turn sparking further fires. High winds have also helped the bushfires to spread, with some fires ‘jumping’ over highways and other
major containment lines. The pace at which the bushfires have spread and the subsequent heavy smoke have made it difficult for emergency services to access and evacuate some communities, at times forcing residents to flee to beaches and other water bodies to avoid impact and await rescue. Power, fuel, and food supplies have been severely interrupted to some communities and road closures have been common. This has resulted in some communities being isolated, or only accessible by air or sea (when smoke conditions allow). The bushfire and weather conditions have also severely impacted telecommunications across most affected areas. Smoke haze has also significantly worsened air quality across southern and eastern Australia, with some areas reaching 20 times above levels considered safe by the Australian Government, including in the major cities of Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne. The reduction in air quality is a major public health concern and the Australian Ministry of Health is warning of significant long-term health risks, particularly for vulnerable members of the population such as elderly, infants and those already managing serious health conditions. Mental health is also a significant concern as people face the stress posed by living through prolonged heatwave and bushfire events, the loss of friends and family, loss of livelihoods, property, pets and livestock, and for some, extended periods of displacement.

The NSW State Government has declared a state of emergency and the VIC State Government has declared a state of disaster, granting them each significant authority to mobilise additional resources and coordinate services and population movement in the emergency management of the bushfires. Current forecasts anticipate that the current bushfires will continue to burn at their current scale or higher, until at least March 2020. Though NSW and VIC have been the worst hit so far, extreme heat and drought conditions across Australia threatens a high likelihood of further bushfires in existing, and new areas over the coming months.

Recent Developments as at 14 January 2020

A ‘mega blaze’ formed on 11 January when separate fires across the NSW and VIC borders joined together. Cooler weather has since slowed the onset of new fires, however, forecasts indicate the situation will worsen again this coming week. As at 13 January, there are 32 active fire warnings in VIC, with the multiple towns still isolated due to road, power and communications outages. Across the border in NSW 123 fires are currently burning, 47 of which are yet to be contained. In South Australia, two-thirds of Kangaroo Island has been fire-affected and firefighters are continuing to battle several fires. Active fire warnings are in place and hot, windy weather conditions are expected to lead to new fires over the course of the week. Power, communications and water supplies on Kangaroo Island have been affected, the local municipality and Australian Army are working to provide a temporary water supply, assess infrastructure damage and eventually restore all services. Fires in WA have cut off some main arterial roads, including at the SA/WA border, temporarily isolating some communities. Tropical Cyclones Blake and Claudia have both also made landfall in WA, though impact has been minimal and there was no need for an ARC response. Public health issues have been identified in evacuation centres and due to smoke haze across much of South-eastern Australia. State Departments of Health are working to respond to these issues.
Red Cross action

The Australian Red Cross’ role as auxiliary to government in national emergency response is primarily to provide psychosocial support, community outreach and in some states, evacuation centre management. This role applies across the disaster management continuum, including community preparedness and early warning messaging, emergency response and continues into long-term recovery. In the lead up to the current bushfire emergency response, the Australian Red Cross Emergency Services team (ARCES) have been supporting communities in affected areas through drought and extreme heat conditions over much of 2019, and then shifting into emergency response mode when the bushfires first escalated in early November 2019.

The main ARCES Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) based out of Melbourne has been open since early December 2019 and from 3 January 2020 has been open 24/7. ARCES have mobilised over 1,590 staff and volunteers from across Australia for the bushfire emergency response. They are working from multiple emergency operations centres and supporting multiple evacuation centres across the affected states.

So far, around 49,000 people have been supported by ARCES during the bushfire emergency response across the following areas:

- Community outreach
- Psychosocial First Aid (PFA)
- Relief coordination and distribution (food, water and hygiene items)
- Support to evacuation centres and services
- Emergency cash grants
- Restoring Family Links (known as “Register. Find. Reunite” in Australia)
- Public messaging and tools for bushfire and heatwave preparedness

A significant amount of the areas affected by bushfire are home to First Nations communities, including Gunnai/Kurnai, Bidwall and Yorta Yorta (all in Victoria). These communities have an extremely strong connection to the land and wildlife, with history stretching back over 60,000 years. First Nations Communities have native title across some of the bushfire affected areas, which involves the management of the natural environment and wildlife. Australian Red Cross are coordinating with First Nations communities as an integral part of the overall bushfire response and working to ensure they are supported. First Nations community leaders will also be key participants in our community-led recovery programming.

The overall coordination of the bushfire response is managed by each state’s governmental disaster management department, the main actors being the State Fire Services, state police and government relief agencies. The Australian Army, Navy and Air Force (defence forces) have also been mobilised to provide support and a significant number of wildlife rescue organisations are also in action. ARCES is coordinating with all bushfire response actors, including embedding liaison officers in state government control centres.

Due to the inaccessibility of a lot of affected communities, evacuations and distributions are being done by sea or air. In this photo, ARC volunteers are on their way to support evacuation of communities from the NSW South Coast. (Photo: ARC)

Australian Red Cross are continuing to monitor smaller bushfires affecting the states of Tasmania (TAS) and Queensland (QLD), though they are not at a level that yet require emergency action.
Recovery Planning

ARC have commenced assessments for psychosocial recovery programming in a number of bushfire-affected communities across the country. A National Bushfire Recovery Framework is currently being developed, based upon the Australian National Disaster Recovery Principles, and Psychosocial Support Principles.

The ARC bushfire operation will cover three main phases, the current early recovery phase (phase one) will comprise support to evacuation centres, psychosocial outreach, Register. Find. Reunite, cash grants and public information. Phase two will see the completion of the community needs assessment in parallel to continuing early recovery activities. Each state and territory will then use the assessment data to develop long-term recovery programs (phase three), based upon long term recovery needs as advised by the communities in their respective contexts. These activities will be grouped either as direct service delivery, capacity and capability provision, and advocacy.

Red Cross’ recovery program will be for a minimum of three years, and be across South Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria. As we are only halfway through the fire season, there is potential for this program to expand in scope. The following table provides a summary of key available operational information by state, as at the issuance of this information bulletin (14 January 2020).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Current areas of ARC response activities</th>
<th>Volunteers Activated (since start of operation)</th>
<th>Register. Find. Reunite. Reach</th>
<th>Evacuation centres/assistance points supported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW +ACT</td>
<td>• Hanging Rock • Moruya • Narooma • Bega • Ulladulla • Wagga Wagga • Adelong • Bateman’s Bay • Picton</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>18,898 people registered, 4,352 enquiries and 227 matches confirmed</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>• Gippsland • Portland • North East • South West</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>22,312 people registered, 745 enquiries and 132 matches confirmed</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>• Kangaroo Island • Adelaide • Lobethal</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>6307 registrations, 68 enquiries and 8 confirmed matches</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>• Eucla • Goldfields</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>297 registrations and 2 enquiries</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,350</td>
<td>47,814</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The IFRC Country Cluster Support Team in Suva and the IFRC Asia-Pacific Regional Office in Kuala Lumpur have offered support to Australian Red Cross should they need it, and are working to direct donor enquiries and share information on the bushfire response to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

Click here

1. Australian Red Cross website
2. Click here to return to the title page
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How we work

All IFRC assistance seeks to adhere to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief and the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (Sphere) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable. The IFRC’s vision is to inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies, with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.

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The IFRC’s work is guided by Strategy 2020 which puts forward three strategic aims:

- **Save lives, protect livelihoods, and strengthen recovery from disaster and crises.**
- **Enable healthy and safe living.**
- **Promote social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace.**