

Australia fires: State of emergency declared for Canberra region

1 hour ago



Martin Ollman Photography

A timelapse of the fires threatening Canberra

Authorities in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) have declared a state of emergency as massive bushfires rage south of Canberra.

It is the worst fire threat to the territory in nearly two decades, officials said.

The main blaze, in the territory's south, is burning over more than 18,500 hectares.

Residents in suburbs of Canberra have been urged to "remain alert" for potential evacuations.

"The ACT is now facing the worst bushfire threat since the devastating fires of 2003," Chief Minister Andrew Barr told reporters on Friday.

"There's now no higher priority for the ACT government at this time than the bushfire threat."

The small territory, located between Sydney and Melbourne, has about 400,000 residents.

In 2003, bushfires in the suburbs of Canberra killed four people, injured another 500 and destroyed or damaged 470 homes.

Similar weather conditions were being recorded on Friday, authorities said.

Mr Barr warned the fires "may become uncontrollable" as temperatures climbed to 40C and were fuelled by strong winds.

He said the worst blaze was just south of the district of Tuggeranong, a 20-minute drive south of Parliament House in Canberra.

He added the state of emergency - which gives extra power and resources to fire authorities - would be in place for "as long as Canberra is at risk".

Fires have raged near the city for weeks. Last Thursday, Canberra's airport was shut down when a blaze threatened to breach its perimeter.

Three US firefighters died on the same day after their aircraft crashed over a fire zone near the city, in the Snowy Mountains region.

Earlier this week, photos of bushfires in the area turning skies red were shared widely on social media.

It prompted authorities to issue warnings against "disaster tourism", following several reports of people driving near active fire zones to take pictures.

"I want to reinforce the message to disaster tourists they're not welcome as this fire approaches," Mr Barr said.

Since September, bushfires in Australia have killed at least 33 people and destroyed thousands of homes. More than 11 million hectares of land has been scorched.

What is happening in Canberra?

The ACT declared a state of emergency on Friday - the first in the area since deadly fires in 2003.

People living in affected areas are being urged to fill up their bathtubs, buckets and sinks, so that when the fire arrives, they have access to water - to extinguish flames and to drink.

"The issue we have with the fire activity is that the fire itself is generating its own weather pattern and that, combined with the wind direction, is what is driving that intensity in the fire," ACT Emergency Services Agency Commissioner Georgeina Whelan said.

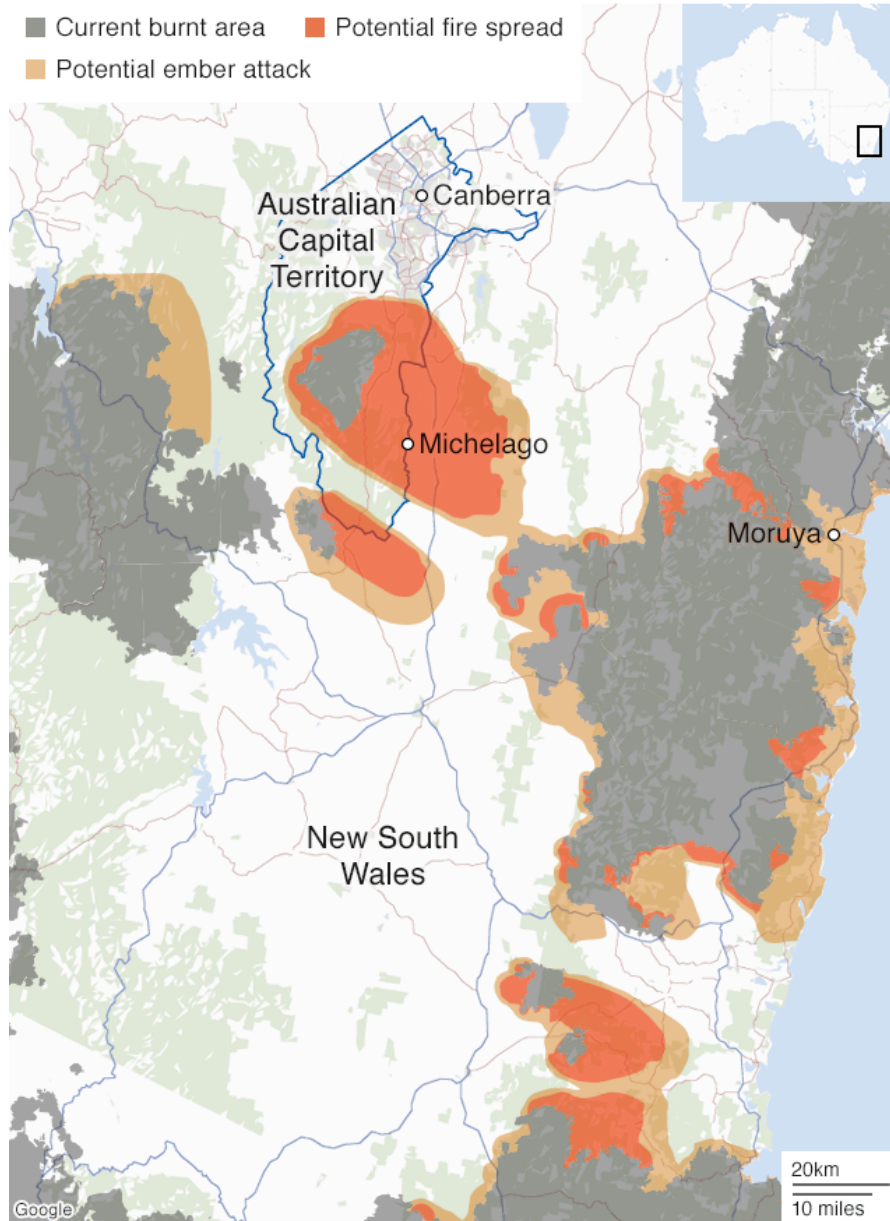


The ACT declared a state of emergency on Friday

"The conditions will potentially become more dangerous and the fire may pose a threat to lives directly in its path," she added.

Images of the Monaro Highway in the ACT, which has been closed, show the skies above it turning bright orange-red from the fire raging nearby.

Fire spread predictions for NSW and Canberra area for Saturday 1 February



The ACT, a small territory located between Sydney and Melbourne, has about 400,000 residents.

Fires have raged near Canberra for weeks. Last Thursday, the city's airport was shut down when a blaze threatened to breach its perimeter.

What is happening in NSW?

There are about 60 fires burning in the state, with five in the south-east of the state, near the ACT, burning out of control.

Three fires in the Bega Valley area were upgraded to emergency level on Saturday.

"The three fires in Bega are creating their own weather conditions and the advice to people in the area is that it's now too dangerous to leave and they should remain in place," local media quoted NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) spokesman Greg Allan as saying.

"The three fires in Bega are creating their own weather conditions and the advice to people in the area is that it's now too dangerous to leave and they should remain in place."

Parts of the state were seeing temperatures several degrees over 40C, he said.

Australia fires: bushfires menace homes and lives – and firefighters warn winds will create new threats

Bushfires

Embers flare into an out-of-control blaze on 'another difficult day' in NSW and in the country around Canberra

• Terror on all sides: inside a firestorm tearing through the Australian bush

Australian Associated Press

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Fire approaches a property near Bredbo in New South Wales. Five emergency warnings were issued for Australia's bushfires on Saturday afternoon. Photograph: Mike Bowers/The Guardian

The New South Wales premier, [Gladys Berejiklian](#), says the Australian state has experienced “another difficult day” as multiple emergency fires burned across its south-east.

While [five emergency warnings were in place on Saturday afternoon](#) for blazes across the NSW south coast and south-east, at 9pm on Saturday evening just one remained at the highest level.

[Australia fires live: firefighters battle bushfires south of Canberra – as it happened](#)

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The Rural Fire Service warned there was an immediate threat to properties and lives from the Clear Range fire in the areas of Colinton, Michelago and Bredbo.

The out-of-control Clear Range blaze was created from embers that moved kilometres from the Australian Capital Territory's large Orroral Valley fire.

Snowy Monaro regional council asked residents in the tiny town of Bredbo – which had a population of just 352 people in 2016 – to reduce their water usage where possible “to ensure there's enough water for emergency firefighting efforts”.

“Water is currently being used faster than it can replenished,” the council posted on Facebook on Saturday evening.



The RFS commissioner, Shane Fitzsimmons, said there had been no reported damage to homes.

But [structures such as horse stables](#), sheds and other outbuildings have been lost to fires in the region. An RFS spokeswoman on Saturday night said there had been unconfirmed reports of possibly five structures lost.

The Clear Range fire would continue to be a key focus for the RFS on Sunday, she said.

A southerly wind change is expected to push through very late on Saturday night and “with any wind change comes added complexities and potential new threats”, she said.

The type of vegetation on the fireground means the blaze can become quite erratic and spot ahead of itself, which can cause extremely difficult conditions for firefighters to manage.

“We do urge people in the communities in the entire perimeter of that fire to have a plan in place and to continue to monitor conditions because things are very likely to change, with the wind changing over the next 24 hours,” she said.

“Keeping in mind tomorrow is still going to be a very hot day with those winds – whilst it’s [forecast to be] better than today, it’s going to be a key focus for us.”

Fire-generated thunderstorms also developed over the Big Jack Mountain, Border Fire and Postmans Trail blazes on the state’s south coast.

The pyrocumulonimbus clouds are “very dangerous for anyone nearby, including firefighters”, the RFS posted on Twitter on Saturday afternoon.

Berejiklian posted on Twitter on Saturday that it had been “another difficult day in NSW particularly in the southeast of the state”.

Very high fire danger is forecast on Sunday for the north coast, greater Hunter, greater Sydney, Illawarra/Shoalhaven, central ranges, northern slopes and north-western fire regions.

In the ACT, residents in the south were warned that the Orroral Valley bushfire could pose a threat to lives as the alert level was increased to emergency, but later downgraded to watch and act.

“Fire activity has eased across the fire ground,” the Emergency Services Agency said on Saturday evening.

People in the areas of Apollo, Boboyan, Naas and Top Naas roads were warned to remain vigilant.

Temperatures in the nation’s capital topped 40C for a second consecutive day. Just before 3pm **Canberra** reached 42.7C.

In Victoria fire warnings have been issued for blazes across the state, with the highest alert level activated for an out-of-control bushfire west of Bonang, in East Gippsland.

Several other watch and act warnings are also in place across the east and north-east, including for Bendoc, Bendoc Upper, Bendoc North, Marlo and Tabbara.

Residents are urged to remain vigilant and monitor the weather conditions.