



Black Saturday bushfires

The Black Saturday bushfires were a series of bushfires that ignited or were burning across the Australian state of Victoria on and around Saturday, 7 February 2009. The fires occurred during extreme bushfire-weather conditions and resulted in Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire; 173 people died and 414 were injured as a result of the fires.




As many as 400 individual fires were recorded on 7 February. Following the events of 7 February 2009 and its aftermath, that day has become widely referred to as Black Saturday.



Conditions

The majority of the fires ignited and spread on a day of some of the worst bushfire-weather conditions ever recorded. Background temperatures reached 46 degrees Celsius (115 °F) and northwesterly winds were over 100 km/h (62 mph). This had been precipitated by an intense heat wave and almost two months of little or no rain.



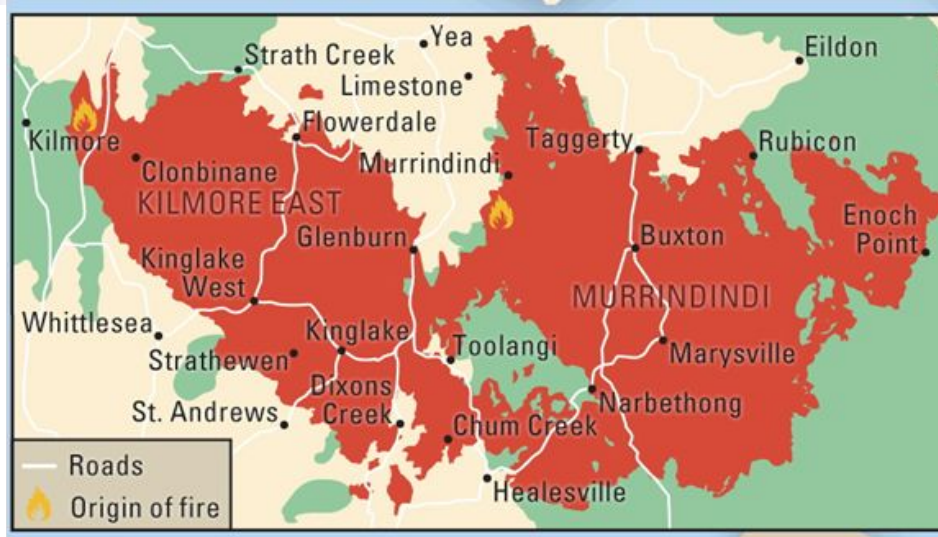
A firefighter in an orange jacket is crouching on the ground, drinking from a plastic water bottle. A koala is sitting next to him, also drinking from the same bottle. The firefighter is wearing a yellow and orange jacket with a red 'C' on the back. The koala is brown and fluffy. They are in a forest with trees and dry leaves in the background.

A cool change hit the state in the early evening, bringing with it lower temperatures but gale-force southwesterly winds in excess of 120 km/h (75 mph). This change in wind direction caused the long eastern flanks of the fires to become massive fire fronts that burned with incredible speed and ferocity towards towns that had earlier escaped the flames.



Losses

Beyond the 173 deaths, 120 of them caused by a single firestorm, the fires destroyed over 2,030 houses and more than 3,500 structures, and damaged thousands more.



Many towns northeast of Melbourne, the state capital, were badly damaged, and Kinglake, Marysville, Narbethong, Strathewen, and Flowerdale were completely destroyed. Houses in the towns of Pheasant Creek (Pheasant Creek, Victoria) Steels Creek, Humevale, Clonbinane, Wandong, St Andrews, Callignee, Taggerty, and Koornalla were also destroyed or severely damaged, with fatalities recorded at each location.



The loss of life on this day was much larger than previous bushfires in the country. The death toll of Black Saturday is almost double that of Ash Wednesday 1983. The fires affected 78 townships and displaced an estimated 7,560 people. Many of those displaced sought temporary accommodation, much of it donated in the form of spare rooms, caravans, tents, and beds in community relief centres.

Causes

The majorities of the fires were ignited by fallen or clashing power lines, or were deliberately lit. Other suspected ignition sources included lightning, cigarette butts, and sparks from a power tool. Also implicated in the underlying conditions was a major drought that had persisted for more than a decade. By early to mid-March, favourable conditions aided containment efforts, and helped to extinguish the fires.

