

## **Bushfires in Australia**

### **Why in news?**

Australia is witnessing widespread bushfires, and the country has declared a state of emergency for the state of New South Wales (NSW) along with a catastrophic fire warning.

### **What does the warning mean?**

- When catastrophic fire warnings are put in place, residents are supposed to leave bushfire prone areas immediately.
- Across NSW, over 600 schools were shut.
- The recent bushfires have, notably, left at least three people dead.

### **Are bushfires new to Australia?**

- Bushfires are a routine occurrence in the country.
- The Australian climate is hot, dry and prone to droughts.
- So, at any time of the year, some parts of Australia are prone to bushfires.
- Such fires happen when grass, branches, trees start burning in an uncontrolled manner.
- For New South Wales and Queensland, the peak risks for bushfires is during spring and early summer, which is around November-December.



### **What is distinct about the present bushfire season?**

- The above pattern now seems to be breaking down, and bushfires are happening outside the regular places and times.
- This bushfire season is believed to be the worst and has started even before the beginning of the Southern Hemisphere summer.
- Furthermore, these bushfires are also affecting the quality of air in the areas surrounding them.
- The readings for PM 2.5 (223) and PM 10 (399) fell in the “hazardous” category (readings above 200) as per the Australian scale.
- On a particular day, 75 fires were ablaze; out of these, 9 were considered at the emergency level and 37 were not contained.
- The day saw over 300 new bushfires as well.

## What causes bushfires?

- Bushfires, while generally slow moving, have a higher heat output and can smoulder for days.
- Bushfires are thus considered to be an intrinsic part of Australia's environment.
- Its natural ecosystem has been shaped by and has evolved with historic and recent fires.
- It is difficult to tame and control naturally occurring bushfires; but their consequences can be minimised if certain measures are taken.
- There are other factors that create a favourable environment for bushfires.
- These include factors such as fuel load (leaf litter, barks, small branches), fuel moisture, wind speeds, high temperature, oxygen, low humidity and ignition source.
- They can be caused by both human activity and lightning, which is responsible for about half of ignitions in Australia.
- The remaining fires have human origins that are classified as deliberate or accidental.
- In fact, police in Australia are investigating if the fire in Sydney's upper north shore was deliberately lit by suspected arsonists (who commit the criminal act of deliberately setting fire to property.).

## Is there a climate change link to this?

- There are speculations about the links between climate change and bushfires.
- While the bushfires are not directly triggered by climate change, climate change is increasing the risk of more frequent and intense bushfires.
- This time, fires are burning in places and at intensities never experienced before.
- E.g. rainforests in northern NSW, tropical Queensland, and the formerly wet old-growth forests in Tasmania
- The drought being faced is more intense than the Millennium Drought, with higher levels of evaporation due to higher temperatures.
- This has dried out the bush and made it easier for fires to start, easier for them to spread quickly.

**Source: Indian Express**



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