

## AUSTRALIA - Bush Fire

Date: February 1983 (FY 83)

Location: Victoria and South Australia

No. Dead: At least 69

No. Injured: Hundreds

No. Affected: Approximately 11,000 people were left homeless

Damage: A total of 2,200 homes and commercial buildings in six townships were completely destroyed and several other areas were heavily damaged; Cleland National Park in South Australia and 25% of the forest land in Victoria were burned; 13,500 sheep and 6,600 cattle perished. Estimates of property damage ranged between \$200 and \$400 million.

### The Disaster

Devastating bush fires ravaged large areas of drought-stricken Victoria and South Australia in mid-February 1983. High winds and temperatures approaching 109°F fed firestorms that spread rapidly along a 500 mile belt of tinder-dry bushland between Melbourne and Adelaide. Authorities believed that at least some of the blazes had been set deliberately. Several small towns and 25% of Victoria's forest land were completely burned out. The townships of Macedon (30 miles northwest of Melbourne), Framlingham, Fairhaven, and Airey's Inlet (on the west coast of Melbourne), and Cockatoo and Upper Beaconsfield (in the Dandenong Mountains) were totally destroyed as was the Cleland National Park, noted for its koala bear population. Anglesea and Lorne on the coast, areas near Mt. Gambia, and the Mt. Osmond and hill regions near Adelaide were all heavily damaged. The fires left at least 69 people dead (including two crews of firemen), hundreds injured, and several thousand homeless. Heavy livestock losses were also reported. Early estimates put material damage between \$200 and \$400 million.

Action Taken by the Government of Australia (GOA), Local Governments,  
and Local Voluntary Agencies

The premiers of South Australia and Victoria declared states of emergency on February 16 and quickly implemented relief and disaster control measures. The State Commissioner of Police in Victoria, as Director of the Office of State Emergency Services, coordinated the firefighting, evacuation, and relief activities in that state. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser inspected the disaster area and ordered military personnel, planes, and helicopters into the region to assist firefighting and relief efforts. All fires had been brought under control and a major relief and rehabilitation program was underway by February 18.

Public appeals for food, clothing, and bedding were broadcast by the local media and met with such a generous response that suitable storage became a problem. Several organizations established fund appeals, including the Australian Red Cross, which mounted a major relief operation supported by federal and state funds and private donations. The premiers of the two affected states set up special funds: "The State Disaster Appeals Bush Fires 1983" in Victoria and "The Premier's Bush Fire Appeals Fund" in South Australia.

Australian churches were active in relief efforts, with many denominations appealing to their memberships for financial support, emergency housing, food, and medicines. The Australian Council of Churches received \$100,000 from a private source, among other donations.

Assistance Provided by the United States Government (USG)

The U.S. Ambassador to Australia, Robert D. Nesen, determined on February 18 that the bush fire disaster was of a magnitude to warrant USG assistance. On his disaster assistance authority, Ambassador Nesen committed \$10,000 to the State Disaster Appeal Bush Fires 1983 in Victoria and \$10,000 to the Premier's Bush Fire Appeals Fund in South Australia. Another \$5,000 was to be held in reserve for a later donation as might be appropriate. The checks were presented to representatives of the two state governments on March 21 and 23.....\$25,000

TOTAL    \$25,000

The U.S. Embassy notified the Canberra headquarters of the National Disasters Organization that the Embassy's pilots and plane were prepared to lend assistance in any manner required. In addition, the crew of the U.S.S. Hoel provided monetary and physical support to the community of Macedon.

Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies

Church World Service - forwarded \$5,000 from the Executive Director's Fund to assist the churches' relief work in Australia.

TOTAL      \$5,000

Assistance Provided by the International Community

None reported.