

Rain brings joy for Australian firefighters, farmers



The unprecedented fires have been fuelled by climate change and a years-long drought. (AP pic)

SYDNEY: Drought-breaking storms dumped desperately needed rain on some bushfire-ravaged parts of eastern Australia on Friday, while giving joy to many farmers who have faced losing precious livestock and crops.

The rains gave exhausted firefighters a boost in battling some of the blazes, with more relief expected over the weekend as the wet weather is forecast to hit other hotspots.

The unprecedented fires, fuelled by climate change and a years-long drought, have claimed 28 lives over the past five months.

They have scorched massive tracts of pristine forests in eastern and southern Australia, decimated livestock on already barren farms and destroyed 2,000 homes.

Following extreme hot and dry weather that have fuelled the fires, Friday saw the heaviest rainfalls in nearly a decade in some areas close to hotspots.

"Rain has fallen across most fire grounds over the last 24 hours, which is great news," said the Rural Fire Service of New South Wales, the eastern state where many of the worst blazes have raged.

"Our fingers are crossed that this continues over the coming days."

Crisis not over

However the rains have not hit all fires in New South Wales, nor in the state of Victoria to the south, where many of the worst blazes are raging.

The rain has also completely missed Kangaroo Island, the nation's third, biggest off the southern coast of the mainland that is famed for its pristine wilderness.

Fires have devastated the national park on the island, wiping out much of its koala population and threatening to completely eradicate bird and other endemic marsupial species.

Authorities have warned the crisis could worsen again with Australia only halfway through its summer.

Celebration

Still, the prospect of more wet weather across eastern and southern Australia over the coming days offered further hope.

The bushfires and the drought have pushed many farmers in Australia to the brink, and this week's heavy rain gave many rare cause for celebration.

“What can I say, we are so lucky. Before this, dams were dry, and we were carting water and feeding stock for months,” Stephanie Stewart, who lives on a farm in northern New South Wales, told AFP.

“This has made life a lot easier on the land, that’s for sure. Now hoping it spreads and can ease the burden for so many other amazing farmers who have been and still dealing with this dreaded drought.”

Animal rescues

Roughly a billion animals are estimated to have died in the fires nationwide.

With huge tracts of their habitats destroyed, environmental groups have warned the blazes could drive many species to extinction.

Much attention has focused on Australia’s tree-dwelling koalas, with images of the cuddly-looking animals being rescued from wildfires making world headlines.

But on Friday morning, some koalas and other native animals at the Australia Reptile Park on the east coast of New South Wales had to be rescued from floodwaters.

“This is incredible, just last week, we were having daily meetings to discuss the imminent threat of bushfires,” park director Tim Faulkner said.

“Today, we’ve had the whole team out there, drenched, acting fast to secure the safety of our animals and defend the park from the onslaught of water.

“We haven’t seen flooding like this at the park for over 15 years.”
Rain dangers

The heavy rain is being seen as a double-edged sword.

The water could also make it harder for firefighting trucks to venture deep into forests on muddy tracks, authorities have warned.

Flash floods are another concern, with scorched mountains unable to hold the water and potentially sending torrents of muddy ash into waterways.

Such torrents have already led to huge numbers of fish dying in rivers that were poisoned by the muddy ash, local media have reported. – **AFP, January 17, 2020**

