

# Fire disaster too complex for piecemeal approach

EDITORIAL

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By **THE AUSTRALIAN EDITORIAL**,  
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The national bushfire map is an alarming sight. From Western Australia to Queensland, and especially along the continent's ravaged southeast coastline of NSW and Victoria, blazes are raging in every state. The selfless dedication and herculean work of professional fire crews, generous volunteers, police and other emergency service workers has been little short of miraculous. Without them, the loss of life, devastating as it is, would be far worse. The Australian Defence Force and reservists have been called in. At least 17 people, including three volunteer firefighters, have been killed since the start of this brutal fire season. More people are missing, feared dead.

Holiday-makers have begun to be evacuated from Mallacoota in Victoria after several days and nights on the beach. Fires have burnt through more than 766,000 hectares across Victoria. NSW, which entered an official seven-day state of emergency at 9am on Friday, has seen an area greater than the size of Belgium burned; more than 4 million hectares destroyed and 900 homes lost.

The National Security Committee of cabinet will meet on Monday to discuss the nation's response. But with more "catastrophic" conditions tipped for the weekend, is that urgent enough? NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons expects conditions on Saturday to be worse than on New Year's Eve. In East Gippsland, temperatures are expected to climb back into the mid-40s, with emergency crews exhausted.

Scott Morrison and Josh Frydenberg have pledged to do whatever is required to meet state requests for assistance. That is reassuring. Under our Federation, states are in charge of

responding to natural disasters. But it means that even in the case of the most severe natural disasters, there is no one leader who is automatically in charge of co-ordinating resources and rescue efforts.

With fires burning across the nation, a brief meeting with the states, convened by the commonwealth, to establish how efforts could be better co-ordinated and whether resources could be shared would make sense. Looking ahead, Mr Morrison, wisely, has already flagged a major rewrite to rules covering hazard reduction, landclearing and where homes can be built. Nor does our system preclude the appointment of an experienced, respected leader with disaster management expertise to take charge and co-ordinate the response on a national basis, under the Australian Government Disaster Response Plan.

The task would require a leader of the calibre of former governor-general Sir Peter Cosgrove, who served as chief of the Defence Force from 2002-2005 after a long military career. In 2006, Sir Peter led the Queensland taskforce responsible for rebuilding communities in the Innisfail region in the state's north following Cyclone Larry.

Such leadership is needed, and needed urgently. Not because political leaders, fire chiefs and others are falling short, but because the complex challenge needs hands-on co-ordination and a national perspective.

Not unreasonably, the public are wondering why, when holiday-makers were stranded on beaches on Tuesday, it took until Thursday for them to be rescued. Were HMAS Choules, which arrived off the coast of Mallacoota at dawn on Thursday morning, and a second vessel, MV Sycamore, dispatched as early as possible? Are sufficient numbers of waterbombing aircraft available, and are they deployed to maximum advantage? Should more be rushed in from overseas if they are available? A national chief, with the overview of every state, would be well placed to judge.

And when the immediate threats have passed, such a leader would also be able to advise on how to best prepare for such catastrophes in future.