

# DISASTERS ‘MORE INTENSE, MORE FREQUENT’

## pm urges people to use ‘common sense’ when warnings are made

MOHAMMAD ALFARES – JAMES DOWLING

Anthony Albanese says natural disasters have become “more intense” and “more frequent” in Australia during his time as Prime Minister, urging people to use “common sense” when warnings are made.

Mr Albanese flew over the Grampians on Sunday with Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan after announcing more support for workers and sole traders affected by the fires, which have now burned through more than 76,000ha of bushland in the Victorian national park.

Speaking from Horsham, 300km northwest of Melbourne, Mr Albanese said the Disaster Recovery Payment would be available from 2pm on Monday and provide up to 13 weeks of income support for impacted individuals.

“We live in a country which has harsh conditions,” he said.

“It has always had fires, it has always had these extreme weather events, but the truth is they are becoming more frequent and more intense and that has been something that I have (seen) as Prime Minister for 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years and I have been to natural disasters and extreme weather events in every single state and territory of the country and that says something about this frequency.”

The Australian understands Mr Albanese intended to say he had attended a large number of disaster sites during his period in office, rather than to claim he had faced more disasters under his term than preceding leaders.

Mr Albanese’s time in office has so far sat within a relative lull of extreme weather cycles, though disaster events have grown increasingly prevalent along a larger time span.

Judging by total payouts made by insurers, a common metric for aggregated disaster impacts recorded by the Insurance Council of

Australia, the Morrison government endured the worst disasters on record. Insurers incurred \$4.4bn in disaster claims from mid-2022 to mid-2024, compared to \$6.1bn from mid-2019 to mid-2021.

The 2021-22 financial year was the worst in history for natural disaster-related insurance costs, at \$7.3bn alone.

Heat anomalies above the average temperature were also more subdued under Labor's stewardship, ranking at 0.5C and 0.98C above in 2022 and 2023, compared with 1.5C, 1.13C and 0.56C in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Mr Albanese said it was only a year ago when fast-moving waters engulfed the regional Victorian town of Rochester, leaving it completely cut off. "This time last year I was here in Victoria looking at floods. This year it is the fire in the Grampians that has had such an impact and continues to have an impact and will continue to do so over coming weeks," he said.

Three homes are believed to have been destroyed while 11 non-residential structures have been burnt down in both Moyston and Pomonal. Some 1000 sheep have also been killed in the blaze.

"People need to listen to the authorities and I saw a tweet ... from another prominent figure just to my right here (Ms Allan) who I think used an appropriate term of don't be a dickhead," Mr Albanese said. "Common sense has got to apply here and your head shakes that people aren't taking the warnings."

Ms Allan said the worker payments were in addition to payments previously announced for individuals affected by the fire.

"It is going to be greatly appreciated by communities we know are doing it tough right now," she said.

The federal government's Disaster Recovery support comes as fire authorities say cooler weather will help them contain the blaze in coming days. State Control Centre spokesman Luke Heagerty said work to contain the fire could take up to two weeks. "There's still a lot of work to be done to confirm the rest of the impact assessment," he said. "These numbers will continue to evolve over the next couple of days."

The easing conditions came as police announced they responded to reports of six illegal campfires on Boxing Day when the danger level was at its highest with catastrophic fire danger ratings.

Police announced that offenders from all six call-outs were expected to be charged on summons with lighting a fire on a total fire ban day.

Several emergency warnings were on Friday downgraded to watch-and-act messages, including for Pomonal, which was almost wiped out by fire last February.

Leading actuaries, analysts and disaster bodies have agreed that disaster rates will rise in coming decades, with the Australian National Auditor's Office placing the estimate for Disaster Ready Funding payouts at \$6.5bn from mid-2022 to mid-2026.

ICA and auditor KPMG provided similar assessments.

CSIRO's 2024 state of the climate report indicated "more heat extremes" were "contributing to natural disasters that are exacerbated by ... climate change, including 'compound events'."

Insured losses from declared catastrophes have grown from 0.2 per cent of GDP from 1995 to 2000 to 0.7 per cent in the past five years, while the five-year average total insurer payout is more than twice the 30-year average.

Emergency Management Minister Jenny McAllister was contacted for comment. The Bureau of Meteorology and the National Emergency Management Agency were unable to comment due to time constraints, while Mr Albanese declined to comment further.

Natural Hazards Research Australia chief executive Andrew Gissing said the bulk of rising disaster costs had been a product of rising urbanisation, and housing being built through fire and flood-prone regions, which were then decimated by climate change-affected disasters.

"There's conversations there that certainly need to be progressed around both climate change adaptation and also where we plan to build our communities in the future," Mr Gissing said.

He said the most acute disaster seasons in recent memory were the Black Summer in 2019-20 and the eastern floods in 2022.