



**National Interagency Fire Center
Australian Bushfire Assistance
Updated March 10, 2020**

General Summary

U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service agency personnel are currently supporting firefighting efforts in Australia, along with U.S. Department of the Interior agency personnel.

Status of Personnel

- Group 9a and several additional support personnel have returned from assignment in Australia.
- U.S. personnel currently assigned to Australia: 65
- U.S. personnel assigned-to-date to Australia: 362

Personnel Currently Assigned

Group (Location)	Total U.S. Personnel
Group 9b (Victoria)	40
Group 9c (Victoria)	20
Support Personnel (Various)	5
Total Currently Assigned	65

U.S. Resources Mobilized to Australia

- The United States has been sending U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) wildfire personnel to assist with ongoing suppression efforts as bushfires continue to burn in Australia.
- Nearly 300 (298) wildland personnel from the USFS and DOI were intermittently deployed from December through February, based on requests from the Australian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council.
- Those who were initially deployed have returned to the U.S. after completing 30-day assignments. There are currently 137 personnel deployed to the states of New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia.



- While recent rain has reduced the immediate threat in some locations, fire conditions continue to impact multiple communities. The protracted fire season has created resource and fatigue management challenges for agencies.
- Australia typically experiences fire season until as late as May. The U.S. will likely continue to send personnel as requested. Two task forces (20-person crews arrive in Melbourne on Feb. 21. One additional 20-person crew is set to arrive on Feb. 24.
- Firefighters from the U.S. are filling a variety of wildfire and aviation management roles, including aircraft management, planning, operations, fire behavior analysis, fireline supervision, chainsaw operations, and other positions. They are based in New South Wales and Victoria, where most of the fire activity is occurring.
- U.S. firefighters are generally given time to acclimate to their new surroundings and the new time zone on the day that they arrive. They then receive operational and safety briefings from Australian fire authorities. U.S. firefighters work closely with Australian firefighters once they have completed thorough briefings and a safety measure review.

International Agreement and U.S. Firefighter Mobilization

- The United States, Australia, and New Zealand have exchanged fire assistance for nearly 20 years. The most recent exchange occurred in August 2018 when 138 Australian and New Zealand wildfire management personnel assisted with suppression efforts in Northern California and the Northwest. For nearly 30 days, they filled critical needs, including mid-level fireline management, heavy equipment, helicopter operations, and structure protection during the peak of the western fire season. The last time that firefighters from the United States were sent to Australia was in 2010.
- The ability to exchange firefighting resources with Australia is based on a bilateral agreement titled, *Arrangement between the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior of the United States, on the one side, and Emergency Management Australia on the other Side, Concerning the Exchange of Wildland Fire Management Resources*, which defines what type of assistance can be provided. How the countries exchange resources is defined in the accompanying Operating Plan. There is a similar agreement and operating plan between the United States and New Zealand. The Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture of the United States of America entered into these agreements under the Emergency Wildfire Suppression Act as Amended, U.S. Public Law 100-428, 42 USC, Section 1856m. Link to Australian International Arrangement: <https://goo.gl/sFTkN8>.



- Under this agreement, only *federal* employees from the United States are permitted to assist in Australia. Legally, the National Interagency Fire Center cannot mobilize non-federal employees, such as state and local firefighters, to Australia.
- Australia is very appreciative of the generous offers of support that they have received throughout this very challenging bushfire season from firefighting agencies throughout the United States. All firefighting personnel needs are being met through existing agreements between Australia, the United States, Canada, and New Zealand.
- While entirely grateful for the offers to assist, Australia has specifically stated that they cannot accept unsolicited wildland fire personnel or volunteers to assist with the fire response. Wildland firefighting requires a very specific and coordinated response effort; only those who are officially requested through the U.S. government should respond.
- The best way to support fire-affected communities and emergency service agencies is through financial donations that can be made directly to the emergency service agencies or established charities.
- More than 6,000 registered charities are working in bushfire affected regions. Please see this [list of contact details](#) for charities that can accept donations to support bushfire relief or recovery efforts. This list has been provided by the Australian Treasury, Australian Taxation Office, and the Australian Charities and Not-For-Profits Commission and will be progressively updated.
- The National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group, comprised of federal and state wildland fire representatives, works with the National Interagency Coordination Center based at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, to mobilize resources and distribute Australian assistance requests across interagency partners.

On-the-ground U.S. Firefighter Interview Requests

- The National Interagency Fire Center is coordinating with personnel in Australia to facilitate interviews with U.S. firefighters working there. When feasible, U.S. firefighters may be available for phone or skype interviews, but please remember that they are working for the Australian government and their firefighting assignments must remain the top priority. Please note the 15-18 hour time difference between the U.S. and Australia, which is a day ahead of the U.S. and be respectful of limited interview opportunities.
- For more information about the United States firefighter deployments, please call the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) Fire Information Line at 208-387-5050.



Current Australian Fire Situation

- NIFC cannot provide statistics on the number of acres/hectares that have burned or specific information about the current bushfire situation in Australia. This information is best provided by the Australian fire authorities.
- Emergency management in Australia is a state responsibility. Detailed information can be found at the following websites:
 - For New South Wales RFS: <https://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/>
 - For Victoria: <https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/>
 - South Australian Country Fire Service: <https://www.cfs.sa.gov.au/site/home.jsp>
 - ACT Emergency Services Agency: <https://esa.act.gov.au/>
 - Tasmania Fire Service: <http://www.fire.tas.gov.au/>
 - Queensland Government: <https://www.qfes.qld.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>
 - Government of Western Australia: <https://www.dfes.wa.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>
 - NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services: <https://www.pfes.nt.gov.au/>
 - National Council for Fire and Emergency Services <https://www.afac.com.au/>
- For donation opportunities or other means of assistance, visit: <https://www.bushfirerecovery.gov.au/offers-help/registered-bushfire-charities>

Questions and Answers

Q. The U.S. uses the term *wildfire*, and Australia uses the term *bushfire*; is there a difference between the two?

A. These two terms are technically interchangeable. Australia uses the term bushfire, and the United States uses the term wildfire, but they have similar meanings. Both terms connote an uncontrolled, unplanned fire burning through vegetation.

Q. Can contract and non-federal fire personnel assist with the Australian bushfire response under the international agreement?

A. No, our international agreement only authorizes the sharing of federal employees. Here is a link to the Australian International Arrangement: <https://goo.gl/sFTkN8>.

Q. Why isn't the U.S. sending airtankers to Australia?

A. Australia has contracts with some of the same airtanker companies; many of the airtankers that are on contract in the U.S. during the summer months are on contract in Australia for their peak months of activity.



Q. Why isn't the U.S. sending equipment to Australia?

A. Australia has adequate equipment capability and has not requested additional equipment. We have sent qualified engine operators to augment staffing on their fire engines.

Q. Why aren't we sending more people?

A. Before resources are sent to Australia, we must have an official request from the Australian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC).

Q. I have wildland fire experience and I am ready to help. Can NIFC send me to Australia?

A. As much as Australia appreciates the generous offers of support, all personnel needs are being met through existing agreements between Australia and the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. No additional firefighters are needed.

The Australian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) Resource Sharing Centre is working with Emergency Management Australia to coordinate international and interstate bushfire emergency assistance. All requests are processed in close consultation with the Australian states and territories to determine appropriate support options for fire-affected communities.

The best way to support impacted communities and emergency service agencies is through financial donations. These can be made directly to Australian emergency service agencies or established Australian charities.

More than 6,000 registered charities are working in bushfire affected regions. This list, provided by the Australian Treasury, Australian Taxation Office and the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, contains contact details for charities that are supporting bushfire relief or recovery efforts: <https://www.bushfirerecovery.gov.au/offers-help/registered-bushfire-charities>. It will be progressively updated.

Q. Is it common for the United States and Australia and New Zealand to support each other during respective fire seasons?

A. The U.S. Australia, and New Zealand have shared knowledge, technical and operational wildland fire management support for more than 50 years. This cooperation was defined in policy and support agreements in 2002. The U.S. and Australia have exchanged techniques, policies, and information since 1964. Prior to this series of mobilizations Australia has sent fire management specialists to the U.S. seven times since 2000, and the U.S. has sent fire personnel to Australia four times since 2003.

Q. What type of international agreement supports this type of assistance?

A. The ability to exchange fire management resources with Australia and New Zealand is based on formal bilateral agreements entered into under the Emergency Wildfire Suppression Act as Amended, U.S. Public Law 100-428, 42 USC, Section 1856m. These arrangements have an



accompanying Operating Plan which defines the process by which each country will exchange resources. The first agreements were signed in 2002, even though the first exchange for firefighting support occurred in 2000. Link to the current Australian International Arrangement: <https://goo.gl/sFTkN8>.

The agreements permit the exchange of federal wildland firefighters only; they do not legally provide for the mobilization of state, local, or volunteer firefighters. These are legally binding documents, so NICC cannot send non-federal employees to Australia or New Zealand.

Q. Are there differences between Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. in managing wildfires?

A. Australia, New Zealand, and the United States share a common system for managing all types of emergency incidents, including wildland fires. (In the United States, this system is called the Incident Command System (ICS); in Australia and New Zealand, it is known as the Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS).) The three countries also share similar training and physical fitness requirements. Firefighters are made aware of localized differences and terminology prior to their assignments. Firefighters in Australia and New Zealand encounter some of the most challenging bushfires in the world. They are highly skilled and able to meet many of the same challenges that U.S. firefighters face, including wildland fires in urban-interface areas, difficult terrain, fuels, and weather conditions, and integrating aerial and ground resources.

Q. Will all of the U.S. firefighters be assigned to the same fire?

A. Not necessarily. They will be assigned according to their particular qualifications. Some of the U.S. firefighters may work together on a particular incident and others may be assigned as single resources, depending on the need. All of them will work closely with the Australian firefighters and Australian fire authorities.

Q. Who pays the cost for deploying U.S. firefighters to Australia?

A. All reimbursable costs will be handled per the Operating Plan under the international agreement. Salary, travel, lodging, meals, and other expenses normally covered by the U.S. will be reimbursed by the Australian government.