

Snapshots 2003

May 2

Australia

U.S. Firefighters Down Under

The Australian State of Victoria, during late 2002 and early 2003, endured its worst fire season since 1939. The 20 year average for acres burned in Victoria is approximately 170,000 acres. This fire season the acreage burned will exceed 3,300,000 acres, 40 times their 20 year average.

Responding to the increasing fire situation, the State of Victoria called on assistance from five other Australian states and New Zealand. On January 16, Victoria requested assistance from the United States. This request, which was based on an agreement between the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Interior and five Australian states, represented the first time that Australia had ever requested U.S. firefighting assistance. The U.S. had requested assistance from Australia during the 2000 and 2002 fire seasons.



A koala bear clings to an ash tree near the coastal town of Lakes Entrance, the R & R location for the American firefighters.

The fire of major concern was located in the Alpine region of the State of Victoria. Parts of the fire extended into the State of New South Wales. It began with several small lightning fires which eventually burned together to cover an area of over 2.5 million acres within Victoria. The three largest fires in the U.S. during the 2002 fire season, the Hayman in Colorado, the Rodeo-Chedeski in Arizona, and the Biscuit in Oregon would easily fit within the perimeter of the Australian fire.

The State of Victoria requested 36 firefighters and one infrared aircraft. The firefighters represented the five major federal land management agencies responsible for fire management in the U.S. The first firefighter departed the U.S. on January 18. The last firefighter and the infrared aircraft arrived back in the U.S. on March 2. Assignments averaged approximately 30 days.



The American handcrew prepares for night shift as a column from the Eastern Victoria fire lays over camp at Delegate River, Victoria.



Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.

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The firefighters did a variety of tasks including constructing fireline, burning out unburned fuels, mopping up, managing portions of the fire, and providing infrared information to fire planners. All firefighters returned home safely with only one minor injury occurring during the entire deployment.

Photos for this story were taken by team members assigned to Australian fires between January and March this year.



An eerie light is cast over East Gippsland by the East Victoria fire that covered more than two million acres.



Fire runs up a “stringybark” eucalyptus tree. Torching stringybarks throw numerous high-flying and long-lasting embers during Australian wildfires, making control a challenge.



Flagstaff Hotshot Superintendent Paul Musser backburns eucalyptus underbrush near the town of Tubbut, Victoria.



U.S. firefighters cut handline around a 10-acre spotfire in heavy mountain ash/stringy bark forest a few miles east of the Snowy River.



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The U.S. handcrew burns out the eucalyptus forest around a farmer's fenceline near Tubbut, East Gippsland.



Troy Cachini, BIA Zuni Hotshots, Glen McLeod, Parks Victoria, Australia, and Dennis Baldrige, USFS Laguna Hotshots pose in front of the Snowy River drainage, about to begin line construction on a 20-acre spotfire, some 20 miles in front of the main fire front.



A pair of American firefighters negotiate an Australian bush track on the way to the fireline. The vehicle is a "pig," an Australian 100-gallon engine.



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