MEDIA RELEASE

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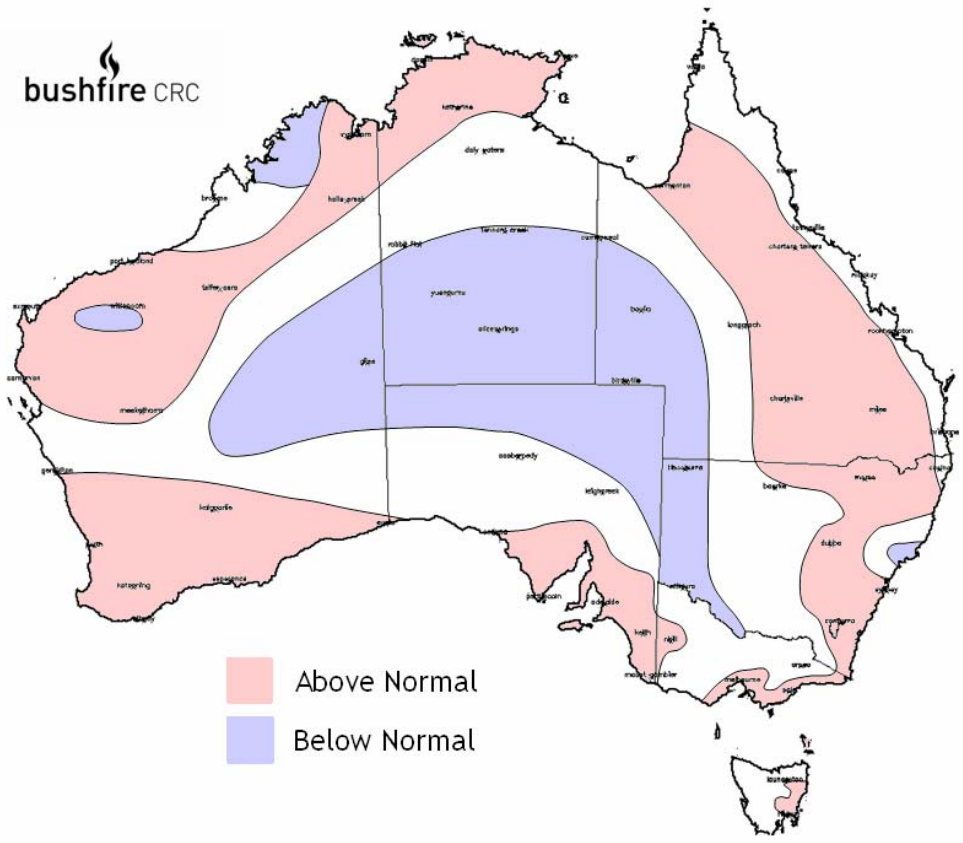
High bushfire potential forecast for southern Australia this summer

Above normal fire potential is forecast across southern Australia over the coming summer months as a result of the lack of rainfall this year. The emergence of La Nina conditions at the start of the year delivered good rainfall in the northern parts of Australia but failed to deliver anything significant in the southern half.

Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (Bushfire CRC) scientists at the Bureau of Meteorology have worked with fire managers around Australia to evaluate the fire potential of the upcoming season for the southern parts of Australia and combined this with predictions made earlier for the northern bushfire season.

The Bushfire CRC has produced a map ***Fire Potential Outlook for Australia 2008-2009*** showing that above-normal fire potential is expected for south-western Western Australia, southern portions of South Australia, eastern Tasmania, southern Victoria, south-east Queensland and in northern and central regions of New South Wales.



Dr Chris Lucas, Bushfire CRC scientist at the Bureau of Meteorology, said the outlook for summer shows the impact of good rainfalls in parts of the country and poor rainfalls in others. “La Nina generally brings widespread rainfall across the continent but what it delivered this year was very patchy. Queensland received a lot of rain leading to a lot of grass growth. Northern NSW and the south-west corner of Western Australia received good early rain, but this fell away in the middle of the year. Other areas, particularly across southern Australia, have seen below average rainfall all year so the fire potential in these regions is high.”

"We have estimated the fire potential by taking account of many factors, not just weather and climate. The fire potential also relates to fuel abundance and availability, recent fire history and the amount of fire-fighting resources available in a particular area."

This is the third year the Bushfire CRC has coordinated the fire potential scenarios from fire and land management agencies across Australia to produce the Seasonal Bushfire Outlook. The Outlook provides useful information that assists fire authorities and governments to make strategic decisions such as resource planning and planned fire management and to reduce the negative impacts of bushfire.

The full *Fire Potential Outlook for Australia* report is available to partners of the Bushfire CRC.

Regional Summary

Western Australia
Above-normal fire potential is expected for the Goldfields and eastern South Coast due to scrub and woodland vegetation being drought affected. Similar conditions are also expected in a small region on the west coast. If the expected spring rainfall does not materialise, the fire season throughout the South West Land Division will likely begin four to six weeks earlier than normal. Heavy winter rains promoted good growth but a very dry August moved the Soil Dryness Indices into record territory. The good recent rains have had a moderating impact, but there are still strong signs of underlying dryness in many areas.

Southern South Australia, south-west Victoria
Long-term rainfall deficits have increased the forest fuel in these regions. An early start to the fire season is likely in some areas, particularly in the eastern regions. Forest areas have the largest risk.

Coastal Victoria
Rainfall deficits over several years have allowed the accumulation of abundant forest fuels. Above normal fire potential is expected. An early start to the fire season is likely. Normal or above-normal spring rains would moderate this forecast.

Tasmania
The fire season will commence early on Flinders Island and in the eastern half of the state. Significant rainfalls are required to reduce the fire potential to normal levels in these areas. Heavy fuels are very dry due to the prolonged drought. Regional firefighting resources are expected to be sufficient unless an extended fire occurs.

Northern NSW, south-east Queensland
Grass loads over the region are much higher than normal as a result of the copious rainfall over the past year. Recent cool temperatures have allowed this grass to 'frost-cure'. Forest fuels are also dry and ready to burn.

Central NSW
Grass fuels are plentiful and will burn easily without adequate spring rains. Should this eventuate, the fires will likely spread into the adjacent forested areas that similarly have normal to high fuel loads.

South-east NSW
While much of the region has experienced consistent rain, these areas traditionally dry out quickly. This, combined with more recent climate outlooks suggesting above-median temperatures across the state, indicates that coastal urban areas from the Hunter Valley to Eden in the south of the state now pose a greater risk for bushfire. This area extends inland, encompassing the Great Dividing Range.

Central Australia
Below-normal fire potential is expected through a large portion of the centre of the country. Rainfall totals throughout this region have been well-below normal for several years, and hence fuel loads are quite low.

The ***Fire Potential Outlook for Australia 2008-2009*** map is available as a PDF at:
http://www.bushfirecrc.com/news/releases/index.html

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