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# As Australia burns, the same ingredients for disaster are found in N.J.

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A member of the New Jersey Forest Fire Service works on a prescribed burn. (Photo courtesy of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection) Photo courtesy of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

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By [Michael Sol Warren](#) | [NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

Apocalyptic scenes from Australia — products of historic, sweeping wildfires in the country's southern region — have gripped the world's attention in recent weeks.

Bushfires have killed 26 people since the burning began in October, according to The Guardian, and over 2,000 homes have been destroyed, according to a CNN report. Over 1 billion animals are believed to have been killed by the fires, according to a USA Today report. Images of the blazes have spread throughout social media, spurring mass sympathy and international calls for donations (here's a list of places you can give money to, compiled by The New York Times.)

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**matthew abbott**

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My last day of the decade felt like the apocalypse. Been covering the Australian bushfires for the last 6 weeks, but haven't seen anything like yesterdays fire that decimated the town of Conjola, NSW.

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The threat of similar devastation has long existed in New Jersey's Pinelands. During a three-day stretch in April 1963, 37 major fires simultaneously burned in the Pinelands, killing seven people and scorching 193,000 acres. And just last year, the 11,000-acre Spring Hill fire struck a remote section Burlington County (no one was killed).

Greg McLaughlin, the chief of the New Jersey Forest Fire Service, said Wednesday that the fires in Australia are fueled by dense brush vegetation. In the Garden State, particularly in the Pinelands, similarly dense brush exists between the towering pine trees.

Some of the most striking images and stories from the Australian fires stem from urban areas threatened by the flames. Much of the inferno has burned in the province of New South Wales, which contains Sydney, the country's largest metropolis at more than 5 million people.

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In New Jersey, the nation's most densely populated state, that threat is just as real. McLaughlin said that about 40% of New Jersey homes are in areas considered to be wildland-urban interface — a transition zone between unoccupied land and urban areas.

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Australia. "We know that bad things here can happen because of fire."

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At the heart of the state's fire defense are prescribed burns: the practice of intentionally setting small, controlled fires to clear out the brush that may fuel future wildfires.

New Jersey has an annual goal to conduct controlled burns on 20,000 acres of land, [McLaughlin previously told NJ Advance Media](#). The [Prescribed Burn Act](#), signed by Gov. Phil Murphy in 2018, directs state agencies to facilitate more burns statewide.

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"I don't think we are in a place where we would be subjected to the level of devastation that [Australia is] experiencing, because we take the measures that are necessary to prevent that kind of disaster," McLaughlin said.

McLaughlin also touted the state's ability to rapidly respond when fires do break out. He said that New Jersey experiences about 1,000 wildfires each year, but he estimates that up to 85% of those fires are kept to half-an-acre or smaller in size thanks to quick reaction from the NJFFS.

Climate change makes all of this trickier, however.

In Australia, there's a good chance that an ongoing drought — which likely would've occurred naturally thanks to expected weather patterns — has been exacerbated by climate change, according to New Jersey State Climatologist David Robinson. The area in which [most of the Australian fires are burning](#) is expected to become drier as the planet warms into the future, Robinson said.

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New Jersey's fire risk is also affected by climate change, but in a different way. For the most part, Robinson said, the Garden State is expected to become increasingly wetter and hotter.

Robinson also said that precipitation in New Jersey is expected to take on a more feast-or-famine color; the state experienced a flash drought last September, for example.

"Had we not had abundant rains return in October, we could've been faced with a fall fire season," Robinson said.

Those changes make it more likely for fires to burn in New Jersey throughout the year, Robinson said, rather than during the state's traditional fire season, which runs from mid-March through the end of May.

McLaughlin said he doesn't expect large fires like last year's Spring Hill Fire to become more frequent in New Jersey. But, he echoed Robinson in predicting that the Garden State's shifting weather patterns will make fires are more likely to occur at any time during the year rather than the traditional fire season.

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McLaughlin said that climate change is reshaping the Pinelands in other ways as well. He noted the spread of new pests, like the Southern Pine Beetle, into New Jersey from the South as a threat, because the beetle causes the b... dead trees then become prime fuel for a future fire.

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