There’s that word again: ‘Unprecedented’ US wildfires signal urgent need for climate action

After Australia’s cataclysmic summer, the United States is now suffering from days of scorching temperatures with devastating and tragic consequences.

‘The story is the same, and so is the root cause,’ says President of the Public Health Association of Australia, David Templeman, the former Director-General of Emergency Management Australia.

‘Just as they did in Australia last summer, lives in the US are being lost, whole towns are burning, tens of thousands are being evacuated, and the losses both human and to nature are unfathomable,’ Mr Templeman said.

‘Yet again, the experts are describing the dire situation in the States as ‘unprecedented’. We’re getting to the stage where that word starts to lose meaning, given the regularity of these catastrophic fire events.

‘Governments around the world can no longer ignore the abundant scientific evidence and universal recognition that global warming and climate disruption are gathering pace, with devastating and deadly consequences.’

In the States, last weekend, the mercury soared to a record 49 degrees Celsius in Los Angeles County. On Monday, 133,500 hectares burned in the state of Washington - more in a single day than in 12 of the last 18 fire seasons. Today, there are reports that five towns have been destroyed in Oregon.

‘In our submission to the Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires, we highlighted that climate was the biggest contributing factor to the most devastating bushfire season in our history,’ Mr Templeman said.

‘Those fires scarred communities and huge sections of the landscape; and the human cost was crushing, even to those not directly impacted. Around 445 deaths were attributed to the smoke, more than 3,000 people were admitted to hospital with respiratory problems, and 1,700 people presented for asthma.

‘While we will never be able to prevent bushfires occurring, we can take action to address the root cause and to prevent our future summer seasons from again spiralling out of control.

‘We’ve seen through COVID-19 how our leaders should respond. They’ve predominantly listened to the science, accepted it, and acted on it. The same approach is needed in addressing our climate change challenges.

‘A key step forward in addressing the public health impacts is implementing a national strategy on climate change and human health.

‘As we’ve seen in Australia over the past 12 months, and tragically, in the United States right now, we ignore the experts at our peril.’

For further information/comment:
Karina Martin, PHAA Media Manager 0450 522 762 kmartin@phaa.net.au