

# Fire stirs heart of the Yarra Valley

By JULIA HUANG  
Epoch Times Staff

Called the "Heart of the Yarra Valley," Healesville, Victoria, is a town of around 7,800 residents. As of Tuesday, 36 houses were confirmed destroyed by the Maroon-dah-Yarra Complex bushfires.

The close knit community has responded by showing one another compassion during a traumatic period, while bracing for more hot weather.

On Saturday evening February 7, the first night of the bushfires, burning embers and charred pieces of bark fell on residential roofs in central Healesville. The bushfires were kilometres away, in towns like Marysville where all but a dozen houses were lost that night. But embers can travel 30 kilometres from bushfires and ignite new ones, adding to the unpredictability of their impact.

With fire authorities occupied, residents relied on each other for warnings and assistance. People took turns keeping a watch on the mountains throughout the night. Every resident had a neighbour to call and check up on if the situation worsened. No person would leave without all the others.

"Healesville's so close knit, it doesn't matter where you live. Everybody knows everybody," explained Bronwyn Sands, a local resident of Healesville. "Particularly in situations like this, everyone rallies together. We know practically everyone in town."

Her daughter, Ashlee Sands, agrees. "If the fire wipes out Healesville, we're all still together, no mat-

ter what. We're all looking out for one another."

The Healesville Memorial Hall is now the town's relief centre. Inside, there are dozens of volunteers organizing piles of donated food, clothing, and mattresses, which have exceeded their capacity. The Salvation Army and Red Cross are now asking for cash donations only.

"The community's been absolutely fantastic. Everybody's just banded together. The community has been opening up their homes to people," shared Jenny Armstrong, a Mental Health specialist with the Eastern Ranges GP Association.

While the strength of the community supports them, Ms. Armstrong has spoken with many residents who are experiencing signs of traumatic stress. Despite the services available, some victims who lost their homes continued to live in their cars for several days. Others are starting to worry about what will happen next.

"The main concern is people who have lost all their belongings... now the information is starting to filter through about loss of family members, loss of friends. The shock is really starting now to set in," said Ms. Armstrong.

"Now the wind's sprung up and everything, I think it's starting to send a lot of fear through people. It's like nothing I've ever experienced before."

Just behind the town shopping centre, the sky has turned red. Smoke billows up from the mountains nearby, covering them like a fog. The proximity of the fires



A fire blazes during the bushfires that swept through the region on February 9, 2009 in Healesville, Australia. With an official death toll of 173 so far, the fires are the worst in Australia's recent history. LUCAS

DAWSON/GETTY IMAGES

weighs on everyone's minds.

Local residents Bronwyn and her daughter Ashlee Sands are planning to protect their house, though many of their neighbours have already left the area.

"Healesville's like a washing machine," Mrs. Sands explained. "The wind will be coming from that direction, and then it'll come from

that direction... You just never know."

"We've got sprinklers, we've got hoses. You can't do much," says Ashlee.

Mrs. Sands points to a stand of trees just a few meters from her house. "That's where we see it all coming. The red smoke, the change in the color of the sky, the trees

blowing... if it hits us, that tree over there is the only warning we're going to get."

Despite their fear for personal safety, Mrs. Sands and other residents are focusing on helping each other by volunteering and looking after vulnerable community members, such as children and the elderly.

Mrs. Sands shared a story about a woman she knows from another neighbourhood whose house was the only one to burn down on her street. "She said to me that she is so glad that that fire went to her house, because if the wind had gone the other way, there were houses with kids and families in them. She's lost everything and yet she was smiling and laughing."

"Now she's going out and helping families," Ashlee added.

Mrs. Sands is determined to wait out the bushfires. "We're staying as long as we can. I've already lost one house to a house fire and I'm not losing another one."

Along Old Healesville Road, just a five minute drive from the Healesville town centre, large tracts of land are blackened. The ground is burnt on both sides of the road. Cows and sheep lounge in patches of paddock that were miraculously spared.

The unpredictability of the bushfires is evident. One house is completely destroyed, its corrugated iron roof lying in ribbons on top of piles of loose bricks. Behind it is a group of houses that were barely touched.

As of Wednesday the 11th, Healesville's threat level has been downgraded, as the temperature cools and winds blow the fires away from town. Some may be relieved, while many remain in a state of vigilance, knowing that until the fires are out and the summer is finished, nothing is certain.

The community is aware that the physical, emotional, and psychological scars from this event will affect their lives for years to come.

## Professional sports squeezed by financial crisis

By HEIDE B. MALHOTRA  
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WASHINGTON—FedEx Corp. opted not to buy Super Bowl advertisement space earlier this month. It balked at the price tag—\$3 million for a 30 second spot—despite being among the Super Bowl's top advertisers over the last decade.

NBC, the Super Bowl's media partner, eventually sold all of the spots prior to the game. But FedEx's absence underscores a broader shift of fortune for the sporting world, which typically relies on advertising, sponsorships, and partnerships in addition to ticket sales.

In addition to FedEx, all three of the U.S. automakers stayed on the sidelines this year. General Motors had been a regular advertiser since 1993, and Chrysler bought a spot in 2007.

### Cutting back on sports advertising

Honda Motor Co. Ltd. announced last December that it would no longer participate in Formula One activities. Formula One (F1) is a popular kind of motor racing, controlled by the International Automobile Federation.

"This difficult decision has been made in light of the quickly deteriorating operating environment facing the global auto industry, brought on by the sub-prime problem in the United States, the deepening credit crisis and the sudden contraction of the world economies," Takeo Fuku, president and CEO of Honda, said in a published statement.

The Daytona 500, also called "The Great American Race," to be held on Feb. 15, was still frantically trying to sell around 15,000 event tickets—almost 10 percent of the 168,000 tickets—two weeks before the event.

Not a single Daytona 500 ticket was left by the beginning of January for last year's event. Like many other sports and recreational events, this year's Daytona 500 is hit by the financial crisis.

The Daytona 500 \$99 tickets

were cut to \$55, "the lowest price for Daytona 500 ticket[s] since 1995," said Robin Braig, president of Daytona International Speedway in a January NASCAR press release.

### Financial crisis hits the bottom line

Racetrack tickets' prices have been reduced throughout the industry. Darlington Raceway in Darlington, S.C., cut prices for 9,000 tickets to the Southern 500 race. Talladega Superspeedway in Talladega, Ala., also discounted 20,000 tickets because people aren't buying.

The Indianapolis 500 race lost over \$5 million last year, and expects substantial losses during the May 2009 event, according to media releases. Cost cutting measures include the cutting of practice days from five days to three.

"It's clearly a response to the economic times we're facing," John Griffin, Indy Racing League spokesman, told the media.

NASCAR, the premier racing league in the United States, announced cutbacks by sponsors. NASCAR took Sprint Nextel Corp. off its donor list after the firm announced \$1.2 billion in labor cost cutting measures, according to a January Sprint Nextel press release.

"Many [team] owners have merged, others have slashed their budgets and some have simply folded their race teams," Brian France, NASCAR chairman said in a press release. "Hundreds of team members have been laid off since November's season-ending race, and the cutbacks spanned the entire spectrum."

NASCAR and other sporting event promoters expect severe cutbacks in sponsorship after traditionally cash-rich corporations such as Caterpillar Inc., Home Depot Inc., GM, and many other corporate sponsors announced cost cutting and employee layoffs.

This year, GM even ended its endorsement association with Tiger Woods.

### Trouble brewing for sports projects

The New York Yankees' \$1.5 billion new stadium—with an original projected cost of \$800 million—is in trouble if New York Assemblyman Richard L. Brodsky has his way.

"The public, not the Yankees, is paying the cost of constructing the new stadium... and the stadium will not create any significant new permanent employment or economic activity," Assemblyman Brodsky said in a statement.

Citigroup Inc.'s \$400 million naming rights deal with the New York Mets' new ballpark is not only getting bad press, but also heat from Washington as Reps Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, and Ted Poe, R-Texas, sent a stern letter to U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner. Citigroup is currently in financial trouble and has received billions in taxpayer assistance.

"At Citigroup, 50,000 people will lose their jobs. Yet, in the boardroom of Citigroup, spending more than \$400 million to put a name on [a] stadium seems like a good idea," Kucinich and Poe said in a joint press release.

The letter continues, "Citigroup [must] cancel its \$400 million advertisement at the Mets field and instead begin to repay their debt to the taxpayers."

Citigroup claimed in 2006 that its contract with the Mets would bring in more customers. Experts suggest that the opposite would happen given the financial crisis.

Bank of America Corp. faces a similar backlash for stadium naming rights. The bank is spending \$140 million for the naming rights for the Carolina Panthers stadium.

"Sports are not recession-proof," says Mitchell Zeits, sports finance consultant, in a recent Knowledge @ Wharton report. "More recently, however, sports leagues have tied their fortunes more closely to corporations—and now are living with the consequences," said the KW report.

## Israel faces gridlock as rivals claim power

JERUSALEM (Reuters)—Israel headed for political gridlock on Wednesday after its election produced rival winners.

Analysts said the country was as split as the Palestinians and the prospects of the two making peace were dimmer than ever.

Centrist Tzipi Livni's Kadima party won the most votes but had little chance of building enough support for a coalition. Right-winger Benjamin Netanyahu can get the support, but analysts said the likely coalition would prove dysfunctional.

"I won," read the headline of the country's biggest newspaper, Yediot Ahronoth, over photos of both leaders. But to some commentators, the rival claims showed Israel had lost. "One thing is clear to all Israeli voters," said the paper's Eitan Haber. "The political system is shattered."

President Shimon Peres must now decide whether to call on Livni or Netanyahu, who then has 42 days to form a government.

Israeli media said it seemed he would have no choice but to tap Netanyahu if the majority rightist parties all back him.

But it would be the first time in Israel's 60-year history that the winner of an election would be passed over.

The results, not yet official, gave Netanyahu 27 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, while Livni's Kadima won 28.

She said she would be prime minister and invited Netanyahu to join a "unity government". But Netanyahu said he would lead the "nationalist camp" in parliament, and control 64 seats.

"With God's help I will lead the next government," Netanyahu, 59, told supporters of his Likud party.

"Tzipi Livni has only the slightest chance, or none at all, of forming a government under her leadership," said Abraham Diskin, a political scientist at Jerusalem's Hebrew University.

### Hard right in pivotal position

Avigdor Lieberman's far-right, anti-Arab Yisrael Beiteinu party, now third largest, emerged as a potential kingmaker.

"We want a nationalist government. We want a rightist government," he said. A deal was needed as fast as possible because the state "has been paralysed for half a year".

"People may not be aware, but we are still without a budget... in conditions of global financial crisis," Lieberman said.

Israel's shekel weakened 0.6 percent against the dollar on Wednesday to near a 16-month low at 4.0610 per dollar, versus 4.0370 before the election.

Netanyahu had been cruising ahead in opinion polls until Olmert's centre-left coalition, including Livni, launched a military offensive against Islamist militants in the Gaza Strip, to stop them firing

rockets at towns in southern Israel.

The 22-day January war cost 1,300 Palestinian lives versus 13 Israelis killed, but had massive public support. After a truce on Jan 18, the election campaign resumed as Israel pursued indirect talks with Hamas on a durable Gaza ceasefire.

The ceasefire talks are still going on, and uncertainty in Israel will not stop them, both sides said on Wednesday.

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana said Israel's next government must also restart serious talks on a comprehensive peace deal, and could not let them stagnate.

"I think if we continue in a crisis management mode, if we don't enter into a conflict resolution mode it will be going back and back again," Solana told Reuters.

Livni, 50, led the main peace talks last year with Abbas's Palestinian Authority, and would try to revive them.

But Netanyahu is cooler on the key trade-offs for a peace deal—returning occupied land and curbing Jewish settlement.

Lieberman and religious parties in a coalition would be likely to set virtually impossible conditions for a peace deal.

The Palestinian Authority, which governs the occupied West Bank, said that whoever ends up in charge Israel is obliged to continue talks and to meet international obligations.

"The ascent of the Israeli right does not worry us," President Mahmoud Abbas told Italy's La Repubblica newspaper.

"In whatever form, the govern-



Israeli opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu speaks to supporters at his election campaign headquarters on February 11, 2009 in Tel Aviv, Israel. URIEL SINAI/GETTY IMAGES

ment, once in power, will ultimately end up with responsibility, pragmatism prevailing."

But many Palestinians were gloomy. "Israelis voted for the right and against peace," said office worker Ali Zaidan. "We will not see progress in the peace process in the coming years." The outcome was also unwelcome news for U.S. President Barack Obama, who wants to revive peace talks to give the Palestinians a state alongside Israel, provided they can repair the split between Abbas and hard-line Hamas Islamists in Gaza.

"The Obama administration is going to inherit the worst of both worlds," said former U.S. mediator Aaron David Miller.

"They have already inherited a dysfunctional Palestinian house, made worse by Gaza, and now what they are inheriting is a dysfunctional Israeli house," he said.

## U.S./Russian satellites collide in space

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The service, launched in late 1998 by a Motorola Inc.-led consortium, filed for bankruptcy in August 1999. However, in 2001, a newly founded Iridium Satellite LLC, owned by private investors, purchased the firm and restarted the service.

Iridium is now being used ex-

tensively by the U.S. Department of Defense as well as for communication with remote science camps, such as those based in Antarctica.

The satellite collision was the first of its kind; investigators at NASA are still trying to find out the full details—including the cause—of the incident.

Such a collision in space, while

possible, is very rare due to the massive distance of satellite orbits. In an interview with the Washington Post, Kelly Humphries, a spokeswoman for NASA from Houston said, "It gets down to probabilities. Space being very big, these pieces of debris being very small, the odds are very high that they're not going to collide."

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