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# The Australian weather – Part II

I want to talk about the weather again. No I haven't run out of ideas for real stories about vehicle air conditioning, but in case you haven't noticed, there's a strong connection between the weather and air conditioning. Besides, I think I'm justified in wringing everything I can out of the weather story because it's big news down here.

I know you have big bushfires in California, but down here they are intense and devastating.

You've seen the news. By the time you read this, there will be more than 200 people burnt to death in the most horrific fires ever seen in Australia.

It's impossible for mere mortals to

understand the intensity and speed of an Australian bushfire. For a start, you can't outrun them. Sometimes, you can't outrun them in a fast car. The Australian fire, in a eucalypt forest, is the same as if you put a match to a leaking fuel depot with tanks full of petrol.

Bushfires are actually naturally-stored solar energy that is out of control. Trees convert all that sunlight into oils which are then stored in the leaves of the Australian eucalyptus tree. Eucalyptus oil is a popular health and household cleaning product in Australia and elsewhere.

So when a fire starts, the leaves of the eucalyptus burst into ready flame which travels hot and fast, like any other oil fire. Houses burn down when there are no trees touching or even close to the house. The wind sends flying embers from the main fire, which catch in gutters and ignite leaves and other materials lying around the yard.

Capturing even bigger headlines was the story of the young guy the police have charged with causing one of the biggest of the killer fires. He was hidden in a secret location pending trial because, in the current mood of the Australian people, a lynching would be fully justified if they could find a strong eucalypt still standing.

During February, Australia had two natural disaster appeals running at the same time. One was for the victims of the Victorian fires, the other was for those living in the 60 percent of the whole state of Queensland which was under floodwater. At one stage, we had a virtual inland sea, covering a million square kilometres or 386,102 square miles. Talk about a land of extremes!

A survey of VASA members on the Australian east coast reveals that workshops are running flat out. The heat in the southern states is causing mass breakdowns of air-con systems, while the intense heat and humidity in the north is bringing the same result.

One Sydney workshop owner has to pay Council fines daily for parking customers' cars in the streets because his work-

shop is already full of stored cars every night. Most workshops are working long days trying to keep up with the constant stream of vehicles with aircon systems strained to breaking point by the severe temperatures and high humidity.

VASA President Mark Padwick had already told his members to gear up for a busy few years, because the economic crisis has slowed new car sales. For this story, he produced new evidence which, he claims, fell off the back of a truck.

The chief of Honda Australia, in a leaked memo to every dealership, put it like this, "There will be a priority towards lifting efficiency in the dealerships, a priority towards improving throughput in service departments, in better servicing and capturing the 385,000 Hondas that are currently on the road under 10 years old. So our dealers need to get these folk back in, service more cars and cover their fixed expenses through back-end type profitability to see through what could be a prolonged downturn in the car industry".

That's a big call in an industry which, in the motoring public's perception, has a confidence rating of somewhere between a tabloid journalist and a lawyer.

That's not just me talking. The Australian consumer watchdog, Choice, has come out in recent times with a blistering criticism of dealership workshops. A survey of more than 20 new car dealerships in the Sydney area revealed that the majority of them failed the most basic of tests on the quality and honesty of their repairs. Choice used what they called a 'ghost shopper', who went from workshop to workshop with the same repair request.

However, if the dealerships manage to pick up their game – and they have a lot of financial incentives for doing so – the aftermarket workshops could be in for a battle for the available repair dollars in a rapidly growing aftermarket industry.

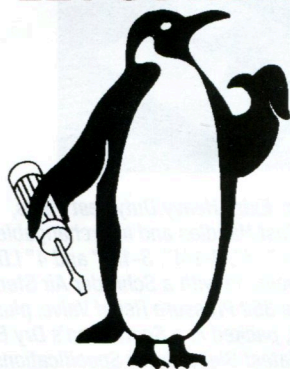
VASA is using this story as a means of enticing more technicians into training sessions so that they can at least keep up in the game. ❀

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