US wildfires worst in 50 years

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More than 25,000 firefighters in 11 western US states are battling 70 large wildfires this week, with nearly one million acres of forest and grassland in flames. This year ranks amongst the worst on record for fires, with 4.3 million acres already burnt by August 9 and several more months of dangerous hot weather due.

As well as fire teams from as far away as Hawaii, two military battalions have been brought in from Fort Hood, Texas and Camp Pendleton, California to fight fires in Idaho and Montana, the worst hit states. Federal authorities plan to commit another battalion. Trained emergency fire teams from Canada and Mexico are already in the field, and another 80 expert personnel are arriving from Australia and New Zealand this weekend.

Air crews are dumping thousands of gallons of fire retardant from air tankers and helicopters. The pilots fly through smoke in 100 degree heat to circle fires and dump the chemicals to stop the fires from spreading.

Over the last few days, in Montana the 19 largest fires burnt through 300,000 acres, mostly in the Bitterroot Valley, where over 50 homes were destroyed and 900 people were evacuated when winds whipped flames 80 feet high. A power transmission tower was destroyed and another burnt, and the Montana Power Company had to close its power plant and declare a system emergency. Following the Bitterroot Valley fire, Jody Eberly, a veteran Forest Service firefighter with 20 years experience, said: “This is the most awesome fire I've ever experienced.”

In Idaho 12 large fires were burning through 431,000 acres. One fire threatened the Nez Perce National Forest, prompting fire crews to wrap prehistoric sites in fire shelter material to protect 1000 pieces of rock art.

On August 5 alone lightning strikes caused 12 new fires in California. In Colorado, 5000 acres in the Mesa Verde National Park were in flames, threatening ancient Pueblo cliff dwellings and artifacts. Other states hit by fires were Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Authorities in Oregon and Washington declared states of emergency, allowing National Guard troops to be called up to fight the fires.

Montana governor Mark Racicot, responding to tinderbox conditions in the state's southwest, ordered six million acres closed to public use, and similar closures were pending on national forest and tribal land. Racicot, an extreme right-winger, encouraged people to pray for relief from the devastation.

According to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho there have been 56,000 wildfires so far this year in the US. The season starts in Florida in March, and then the fires move north and west. In May this year a controlled burn that got away threatened the destruction of Los Alamos nuclear installation in New Mexico, prompting official investigations into responsibility for the near disaster.

Firefighting in the present round of fires is costing about $15 million a day, with costs to date around $500 million. Bill Clinton visited the huge fire in the Payette National Forest in Idaho on Tuesday and promised $150 million more. This barely redresses cuts made to the fire preparedness budget of the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM,) which asked for $401 million this fiscal year, and instead received only $297 million.

When fires hit on so many fronts at once, firefighting resources are stretched to the limit. At the North Fork, Colorado fire, Jessica Higgins, US Forest Service wildlife biologist acting as fire information officer, noted the difficulty in obtaining technical resources: “Pretty much all the fires are competing with each other for resources. There's definitely a backlog of requests for crews right now.” This is in a situation where even quite small fires are potentially just as lethal as those with national priority.

The longer fire season is also creating personnel problems. The ranks of civilian firefighters will shrink

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as college students and teachers return to school. In Idaho, school bus drivers who usually drive 18,000 students to school each day are presently ferrying fire crews to fires, and will shortly need to return to their usual job.

Between them the Forest Service and the BLM manage about 450 million acres. To cover this vast area in a year of record-breaking demand, the severe shortage of firefighters is compounded by a lack of fire management specialists. Managers supervise front-line fire fighting, organise evacuations, determine priorities for fire defense and distribute resources. For the entire nation there are only 16 management teams trained to handle the most serious fires. Ron Dunton, national fire program manager of the BLM admitted this week: “There's a huge strain right now on the entire firefighting structure. We are into an absolutely unprecedented event.”

The number of experienced fire managers is steadily decreasing, indicating a crisis in forward planning. It takes 12 to 15 years for a manager to undertake training and gain the necessary experience.

Forest experts have repeatedly warned that a horrific fire season was inevitable. Dunton said that the size and number of this year's fires “are telling us we have a major problem from an ecological standpoint. We need to start to work to bring back the natural balance.” According to Forest Service figures, 60 percent of the land in the US national forest system is an abnormal fire hazard. The largest part of the area now burning is national forest land.

The Forest Service is finalizing a “cohesive strategy” for mechanical thinning and controlled burns to reduce the crowded undergrowth in the national forest, at a projected cost of $825 million a year for 15 years. The BLM is pushing to rehabilitate 75 million acres of the Great Basin where new grasses have intensified the hazard of fires, at a cost of $40 an acre.

Yet costcutting is undermining the effectiveness of these agencies, highlighting the necessity for planning that is unrestricted by the profit system. On January 3 this year, BLM Director of Office of Fire and Aviation Lester Rosenkrance warned Bureau Director Tom Fry that the agency was facing a calamity and was unprepared for a severe fire season. “There is no doubt in my mind that we are placing the public and property at greater risk as our ability to respond quickly and aggressively to wildland fire decreases,” he wrote to Fry. His reward for the advice was a forced transfer, pushing him to resign instead.

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