Wildfires rage in Arizona

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Over the last week firefighters have been working around the clock to corral the Wallow fire in eastern Arizona.

Thousands have been evacuated from the towns of Sunrise, Greer, Blue River, Alpine, Nutrioso, and subdivisions along highways 180 and 191. Residents of Alpine and several other towns will most likely not be able to return to their homes for at least a few more days.

The fire, the largest in Arizona's history, has so far burned over 733 square miles in the state and in neighboring New Mexico.

In the first few days, the fire grew exponentially due to strong winds and drought conditions in the southwestern United States. Beginning May 31, Apache-Sitegreaves National Forests (ASNF) calculated the fire had burned 2,615 acres; this number more than doubled the following day, grew five times larger than that on the third day, and by June 3rd the fire was over 100,000 acres.

On the morning of June 12, ASNF estimated there were 443,989 acres burned, and as of Monday afternoon the fire was estimated at around 470,000 acres—surpassing the 2002 Rodeo-Chedeski fire which was finally contained at 468,638 acres.

As of this past Sunday at 8:00 AM ASNF reported 7 injuries from the fire. At least 29 residences have been destroyed, 5 damaged, and 2,714 are still threatened. Four commercial properties have been destroyed and 473 are threatened.

One of the most dangerous products of wildfires is the air quality. Smoke from a burning forest contains particulates, gases and water vapor. The small particles can enter the lungs and those who have asthma or other lung diseases are at risk of additional lung and health problems if they are exposed to the poor quality air. Most of northeast Arizona is under an air quality advisory, as is central New Mexico.

There are 4,311 workers involved in fighting the blaze. Among them, 24 crews of specially trained firefighters have been working around the clock. These highly skilled specialists work where the fire is the hottest, and can be away from logistics and other support for extended periods of time.

Crews have been working with 15 helicopters and five air tankers, along with hundreds of trucks and other ground vehicles. One of the main tactics used in the fire has been the backfire, or burnout, operation, where firefighters will control the burn of a section of forest in the fire's path so there is nothing left to fuel the oncoming fire. This was successful last weekend in preventing the fire from spreading to the north, but the fire is still only around 15-20 percent contained and is now burning in western New Mexico. The amount spent on fighting the fire currently stands at $31.7 million.

Crews have been working with equipment that is aging and increasingly unsafe. The tanker planes leased by the US Forest Service, for example, average about 50 years old. According to the group Associated Aerial Firefighters, since 2002—when two air tankers crashed while battling fires in California and Colorado—three large air tankers have crashed, killing eight crew members. The *Washington Post* recently cited a 2009 government report which recommended that the Forest Service's remaining fleet should be permanently grounded by 2012 out of safety concerns.

Other fires rage in Arizona. The Horseshoe 2 Fire has burned over 170,000 acres and is slightly over 53 percent contained.

The Monument fire near the town of Hereford has burned 3,700 acres and has been labeled a Level 1—the most dangerous. Some 150 firefighters are struggling to contain the blaze; over 200 people have been evacuated.

Another wildfire is burning in parts of Texas, New

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Mexico, and Colorado. It has reached 24,000 acres and has closed Interstate 25 between New Mexico and Colorado. Many homes are in danger, as well as Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

This year, in the state of Texas, fires have already burned 2.9 million acres—also a state record. The Texas Forest Service is still fighting 13 fires in the state.

The first five months of this year have seen more than 3.2 million acres from Florida to Arizona scorched by wildfires. This is already close to the 3.4 million acres burned throughout all of last year.

In the past decade the southwestern United States, as well as other dry areas in the world, have experienced severe drought. Many have been threatened with water shortages, both for drinking and for agricultural irrigation. Drought can devastate local and regional economies, and dry, hot weather also leads to increased risk of fires.

During the same period there has been an increase in precipitation and flooding in the South and Midwest. A recent report from NASA projects that there will be “more burning in a drier western United States, and less burning in a wetter eastern United States” by the turn of the 22nd century.

Specialists say there is "unequivocal" evidence that global warming of the earth’s climate is a reality. According to the non-profit advocacy group Environment Arizona, the impacts of this on the state “are likely to include less available drinking water due to increased evaporation and changing weather patterns; an increase in heat waves and extreme high-temperature days resulting in an increased risk of heat related illness and death; more fuel for wildfires during hotter drier summers; and a decline in the number of farmed acres and other adverse affects [sic] on Arizona’s agricultural economy.”

In addition to the fires across the Southwest, the past year has seen a string of major environmental disasters in the United States, including blizzards, the consequent record spring flooding, and a series of tornado-bearing storms in the South that killed hundreds.

As with the tornado and flood disasters, the severe disruption of life from wildfires points to the need for better social planning and increased protection.

While the Arizona fire has not reportedly caused any deaths, thousands have already faced evacuation from their homes, jobs, schools, and daily lives. One thing is clear during and after events such as the Wallow Fire: the inability of the establishment to address the needs of victims. Residents who are forced from their homes should be compensated, and cities and towns should be protected from recurrent fires through massive investment in firefighting capabilities and fire prevention.

The Obama administration, like the Bush administration before it, has ruled out any meaningful response to either the environmental crisis or areas impacted by disasters. Funding for both emergency aid and scientific research have repeatedly faced the budget ax while tax breaks for corporations and imperialist wars are on the rise.

As a result, victims of disasters are left to fend for themselves, facing battles with insurance companies, confronting long-term damage to personal property and the broader economic life of the region, and are vulnerable to repeated catastrophes.

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