

Worst wildfire in Colorado history destroys hundreds of homes, kills two

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17 June 2013

Firefighters in the Southwestern US state of Colorado are currently in the midst of battling one the most destructive infernos in the state's history. The blaze, first reported off of Highway 83 in the Black Forest region near the city of Colorado Springs last Tuesday, had by the end of the week burned nearly 150 square miles of land and as many as 482 homes. Two people are reported to have died in the fire.

By the weekend firefighters had met with some success due to unexpected rain showers and docile winds, but a disaster emergency declaration remains in effect in Rocky Mountain National Park, just north of Denver, and thousands are advised to stay away from their homes.

In all, 38,000 residents have been forced to flee their homes, many with no hope of returning. "It's devastating. I'm 70 years old. I had over 30 years in that house," Black Forest resident Ray Miller, whose home was one of the first to be engulfed, told the *Los Angeles Times*. "My whole life was in there: my Lionel train when I was child that my parents bought me. Pictures, family furniture, everything... It's all gone," he said. "It's probably next to the death of the parent or a child or spouse—after that, it's the most devastating thing that can happen."

As of Thursday the fire had already outdone the damage caused by last year's Waldo Canyon inferno, which burned for over a month, engulfing nearly 350 homes, and resulted in the evacuation of over 32,000 people. That blaze had also occurred in the outskirts of the Colorado Springs area.

The estimated cost of the Waldo Canyon fire was over \$350 million. It is not yet known the complete cost of the damage caused by the current blaze. So far, the cost of firefighting efforts alone have totaled more than \$5 million.

El Paso County Sheriff Terry Maketa said that the damage from the latest blaze was such that it looked "as if a nuclear bomb had gone off in that area." Over 1,000 personnel collaborating at the federal, state and local levels to contain the disaster.

Barack Obama offered the usual perfunctory condolences. The president announced his "gratitude and appreciation for the brave men and women fighting tirelessly to combat these devastating fires," while offering expressions of pity to those whose lives have been destroyed by the fires. No further resources were pledged to fighting the blaze, preventing future fires, or rebuilding of homes of those affected.

The cost of fighting wildfires has climbed precipitously in the past several decades. In fiscal year 2012 over 40 percent of the National Forest Service budget went to the task of extinguishing fires, up from just 13 percent in 1991. Since 2000 the cost has doubled from roughly \$540 million to over \$1 billion.

A week before the Black Forest fire broke out, the eastern part of Colorado was affected by a large dust storm, known as a *haboob*, which is said to coincide with drought. The storm had been the seventh such occurrence since November.

The worsening droughts and wildfires afflicting the American Southwest are closely linked to global climate change. Many forested areas are experiencing longer instances of wildfire "burning seasons" than were previously seen on record. According to the National Forest Service (NSF), wildfires today burn as much as twice the acreage as was consumed only 40 years earlier. Todd Sanford of the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) has noted: "The greatest increase [of wildfires] has occurred in mid-elevation Northern Rockies forests, which are having higher spring and summer temperatures and earlier snowmelt." In all,

burning seasons last approximately two months longer today than were recorded in the 1970s.

The droughts, wildfires, and other extreme weather events in recent memory have further exposed the indifference of the political establishment to the safety and basic needs of the population. Among such events are Hurricane Sandy, which heavily impacted the Mid-Atlantic coast of the United States late last year, as well as the “derecho” storm that struck the Washington D.C. and Maryland area last summer, claiming over two dozen lives.

While the ruling class refuses to take any substantial measures to address the issue of climate change, it is simultaneously cutting services, such as firefighting and disaster relief, that are necessary to mitigate the harm caused by resulting extreme weather events.

The federally enforced “sequester” that went into effect last winter resulted in the slashing of over 500 firefighting positions from the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), amounting to about a 5 percent diminishing of that agency’s manpower.



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