

# Forest fire rages in Northern California near Yosemite National Park

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One of the largest forest fires in recent California history has been burning since August 17, near Yosemite National Park. Nearly 150,000 acres have burned, and as of this writing firefighters have contained only 15 percent of the fire. California Governor Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency last Friday for San Francisco, which gets its water and electricity supply from the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, which is threatened by the fire.

The fire started in a remote canyon in Stanislaus National Forest and burned north toward Tuolumne City and east into Yosemite National Park. The fire is just one of more than 50 wildfires burning throughout the Western United States. While dry and hot weather are the immediate cause of the fire, years of budget cuts to fire protection services have compounded the crisis.

More than 3,000 firefighters are currently at work containing the fire and many towns like Tuolumne and smaller communities are under voluntary evacuation. Dick Fleishman of the U.S. Forest Service told *USA Today*, “It’s the highest priority fire in the country right now because of its location, because Yosemite National Park is at risk. It’s not just a national treasure, it’s a world treasure.” So far there have been no reported casualties.

Of particular concern is the fire’s close proximity to the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, which provides San Francisco with 85 percent of its water supply. The city’s supply of electricity is generated by the O’Shaughnessy dam, which provides power to many municipal buildings like San Francisco International Airport and San Francisco General Hospital. Two of three of the system’s powerhouses were taken offline Saturday because of possible fire damage. As of this writing, the fire is primarily west of Yosemite National Park and about 20 miles from the iconic Yosemite

Valley.

Austerity measures at the federal and state level have undoubtedly contributed to the ongoing fire disaster, which has cost at least \$20 million so far. In fact, the US Forest Service has already spent most of its yearly budget, at the peak of wildfire season, forcing it to divert \$600 million in funds from timber and other areas just to continue fighting ongoing fires.

As of last week, the Forest Service was down to \$50 million after already spending \$967 million this year alone. In 2013, 33,000 wildfires destroyed 5,300 square miles, 960 homes, and 30 commercial buildings in the Western United States. This will be the second consecutive year, and the sixth year since 2002, that the Forest Service has had to divert funds just to fight fires.

Thanks to federal sequestration cuts that went into effect earlier this year, the Forest Service’s wildfire fighting budget was cut by \$115 million. A wildfire reserve fund created in 2009 known as the FLAME Act was also cut from \$413 million in 2010 to \$299 million this year after automatic cuts. The cost of fighting fires has also gone up dramatically. In the 1990’s the federal government spent less than \$1 billion fighting wildfires, but since 2002, the government has spent a yearly average of \$3 billion on forest fires.

Years of budget cuts from Democrat and Republican governors have undermined the state’s ability to effectively fight fires of this magnitude. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), California has only 8 air tankers left to fight fires, compared to 44 in 2002. The GAO also cited “improvements needed” in US fire management.

While Governor Brown has made numerous statements about how California’s budget woes are over, social services such as pensions, education and

state parks remain grossly underfunded. On May 13, 2011, the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) released a list of 70 state parks that were set to close, one quarter of California's state parks.

While many of the state parks remain open, the closure of dozens of parks was a first in the state's history. Many of the state's parks were established during the post-war boom, but now they are being left to rot in the name of austerity. At least \$22 million has been cut from the state's parks since 2011.

Many parks were slated for closure even when a budget surplus was announced in 2012. A so-called "scandal" was even declared by *The Sacramento Bee* when it was revealed that \$54 million was kept hidden by park administrators. While there was no evidence the money was used illegally, the media preferred to vilify various state bureaucrats instead of focusing on the root cause of the issue, namely, the budget cuts emanating from the state and the closure of parks.

Another factor behind the fires are worsening droughts linked to climate change, which is exacerbating the intensity and duration of wildfires. Currently, wildfire season lasts about two months longer than previous decades. Rising temperatures, severe droughts, and budget cuts to parks and fire fighting services are making the Western US more and more conducive to huge wildfires like the ones now being seen in Northern California.



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