

Wildfire forces evacuations in Southern California

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A fire that broke out Thursday morning in Southern California has spread rapidly, forcing 3,700 residents to evacuate and scorching 1,700 acres of land. The “Colby” fire, centered just east of Los Angeles, is being spurred on by a record-breaking drought, seasonal dry winds, and high temperatures of 85 degrees Fahrenheit, despite it being winter.

At the time of writing, 700 fire fighters have been deployed to the Colby fire zone and 30 percent of the fire is considered contained. At least 22 homes have either been destroyed or damaged. Three people have incurred minor injuries, two of them firefighters. No one has died. The fire primarily threatens the upper-middle class suburb of Glendora and the bordering Angeles National Forrest park area. Additionally, the fire has led to air quality warnings throughout the greater metropolitan region of Los Angeles.

Last year was the driest year on record for California. On average Los Angeles receives 14.74 inches of rain a year; however, in 2013 there was only 3.4 inches. Friday morning, Governor Jerry Brown announced that the state was officially in an emergency drought. In the past week, daily temperature records were set in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, California. Data collected so far this month suggests that January 2014 will also be the driest January on record for California.

Wildfires are increasingly common in the southern and central parts of the state. The last fire to rage through the San Gabriel Mountain area, where the Colby fire is located, was only a few years ago, in 2009. According to the Associated Press this fire burned for months, killed two firefighters, destroyed 89 homes and over 200 structures, and charred 250 square miles. In May 2013, several smaller wildfires broke out in Southern California, leading to tens of thousands of burnt acreage and the destruction of many homes. In

August 2013, hundreds of thousands of acres burned in Yosemite, CA, threatening water supplies for millions of people, power, and the national landmark of Yosemite Valley.

Unusually high temperatures and persistent drought are a new normal in California. According to a California government document, *Preparing for Extreme Heat*, between 2004 and 2030 average state temperatures are expected to increase between 3 and 5 degrees Fahrenheit. By 2050, the average state temperature could rise by 9 degrees.

A report issued by the California Environmental Protection Agency in August last year stated that climate change was “an immediate and growing threat.” The California EPA secretary warned that there was nothing abstract about climate change and that the state was already feeling its effects.

The three worst fire years in California since 1950 were in 2003, 2007, and 2008. Since 2000 the average yearly acreage burn has been 598,000. Between 1950 and 2000 the average was 264,000 acres. The report also notes that Sierra Nevada glaciers, a huge source of water for the state, have dwindled in size, as well as run off to major rivers, like the Sacramento River. The report attributes these changes to global warming.

As the climate crisis worsens massive cuts are being made to fire protection services. In 2013, sequester cuts took away \$115 million from the Forest Service’s wildfire fighting budget. Also in 2013, an automatic cut to the FUND act, a reserve fund to fight wildfires, depreciated the fund from \$413 million to \$299 million.

California has experienced its own cuts. In 2011, Governor Jerry Brown took \$30 million from CalFire, which fights California forest fires. The CalFire program was forced to reduce its engine staffing from 4 to 3 people.

Despite wildfires being a clear and growing threat due to global warming, Governor Brown, in his 2014-2015 budget proposal offers no form of assistance. The budget offers a one-time payment of \$14 million to replace a one-time source of funding from last year. This money will allow the park service to keep 70 state parks open that faced likely shutdown, at least for this year.

Meanwhile Glendora police have accused three campers of starting the Colby fire. The young men, all in their early twenties, purportedly tried to warm themselves at 6 am with a campfire. Glendora's Police chief told a press conference that people commonly camp in the hills above Glendora; however, the fire warning that was in effect made it illegal for anyone to start a fire outside of a designated campfire ring at a campground. The chief told reporters that the accused were "apologetic" and "cooperative." Each of them is being held on \$500,000 dollar bail and could face federal charges. These campers may be charged massive fines they will not be able to pay, and may also face time in jail or federal prison.

While the accused may be responsible for lighting the match, evidence demonstrates that these fires are not a freak accident but a growing threat, born out of global warming and exacerbated by the attack on social services to the population.

Nothing meaningful has been done to reverse greenhouse gas emissions. According to the *New York Times*, the fifth Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, leaked Friday, suggests that "Another 15 years of failure to limit carbon emissions could make the problem virtually impossible to solve with current technologies." If there is a sense of gloom about the issue, it is because it is widely understood that the banks and corporations will never tolerate such an "unnecessary" encroachment on their profits.



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