

Obama administration denies FEMA assistance to Washington State fire victims

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27 August 2014

Last week, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) issued a decision rejecting Governor Jay Inslee's request for grants, loans or public-assistance to individuals affected by the massive fires in the Okanogan County of Eastern Washington State in early July.

President Obama declared Washington eligible for disaster assistance on August 12 after a request by the governor. However, the assistance was limited solely to public agencies. Furthermore, FEMA will only pay up to 75 percent of “eligible” fire-fighting costs.

While state officials plan to file an appeal, the denial exposes the contempt of the Obama administration toward the victims—mostly poor and working class—of the disaster. The nine years since Hurricane Katrina, a catastrophe which exposed Washington's incompetence and indifference, have only served to harden and institutionalize a political apparatus completely divorced from the needs of the mass of society.

Described as the biggest wildfire in state history, the fire devastated this rural community, destroying 300 homes, burning 400 square miles, with private property losses estimated at a \$28 million and slightly less than half of those without insurance coverage. One person—a retired sergeant major in the Marine Corps—died from a heart attack, while trying to put out a spot fire near his home.

Adding to the troubles of the residents, last Thursday brought thunderstorms triggering mudslides as rains hit fire-exposed soil. The Okanogan County Sheriff has warned residents to stay home unless flooding puts the person at risk. Roads remain hazardous, and some are washed out with Highway 153 still closed.

Okanogan County is home to around 40,000 people, and 20.6 percent are below the federal poverty level, about twice the rate in Washington state. The median

household income is just \$40,924. Only 17.6 percent of residents over 25 years old carry a Bachelors degree, about half the state average. The large majority—80 percent—of the population is white. The county is sparsely populated, with 7.8 people per square mile compared to the state average of 101.2. The longer distance between homes creates further difficulties for underfunded state and neighborhood agencies, who have been left to deal with the aftermath of this tragedy.

Okanogan County Fire District 6 emergency fire responders, more than 90 percent volunteers from accounts on social media, have done a heroic job in containing the fire. However, the fire department is severely underfunded, and a proposed levy notes the current unsafe operating conditions that could result in firefighters being injured or killed. The levy would raise \$2.4 million by putting the burden of the safety of the firefighters on the backs of the impoverished population, by increasing property taxes by 17 cents per \$1000 assessed property value. A similar measure to raise \$5 million was rejected by voters in 2008.

This has not prevented the state of Washington, under Democratic Governor Inslee and the Democratic Party-dominated legislature, from handing out the largest tax cut in history to the highly profitable aircraft manufacturer Boeing. Labeled as the “biggest tax subsidy in U.S. history”, by Greg LeRoy, executive director of Good Jobs First, Inslee signed the \$8.7 billion in tax cuts demanded by Boeing into law last November.

Forest fires are a natural and essential phenomenon in an ecosystem. But the tragedy faced by the working class of Okanogan is in no way an “act of God”, but the result of the deliberate class policy of successive administrations, both Democrat and Republican.

According to a research paper—“Wildfire and

Poverty” released by Portland State University in 2001—there is a distinct correlation between the effects of forest fires and poverty, as it is primarily low income workers who build inadequate housing in the wildland-urban interface, in the outskirts of the city. These houses are not adequately fire-proofed, and do not have at least 30 feet of space free of vegetation extending out from them, noted as the primary two factors preventing loss of life and property from a forest fire.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced a report that focuses on how successive administrations have consistently cut funding for programs aimed at preventing forest fires, from 1995 to the present.

Vilsack acknowledges an overall increase in staffing of only 110 percent from 1998 to the present, despite the worsening climate conditions that have increased the spread of fires, tripling the area burnt since 1980 on an annual basis. Even more alarmingly, the staff dedicated to managing the National Forest System has been cut by 35 percent. A full 42 percent of the totally inadequate current budget is to fight the fires, up from 16 percent in 1995.

This is a policy that makes the resulting fires all the more devastating, and to compound matters, there is an ongoing practice of “borrowing” funds from non-fire activities to combat fires. As in countless other instances in capitalist society, policy is not directed by any rational plan and agencies are forced to manage crisis after crisis. The overall area burned is projected to double by late this century across 11 western states.

In 2013, the US Forest Service firefighting budget was cut by 5 percent, resulting in 500 fewer firefighters and 50 fewer fire engines.



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