

More than 3,000 flee King fire in California

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Since it began September 13, the King fire, centered in El Dorado County and Placer County, California, has spread rapidly through the Sierra Nevada mountain region. The fire threatens roughly 12,000 homes and a total of 21,000 structures in this forested area to the east of Sacramento. More than 3,000 people have fled their homes so far. As of this writing, the fire is blazing through more than 82,000 acres, or nearly 130 square miles, which is larger than the city of Sacramento, with only 17 percent of the fire contained.

The fire has destroyed 10 residences and 22 other structures in the White Meadows area of El Dorado County. Property damage estimates are difficult to determine in other cities due to the dangerous conditions. Air pollution stemming from the fire has reached the rarely seen “hazardous” level throughout much of the region west of Lake Tahoe, canceling an Ironman Triathlon scheduled for this weekend.

Over 5,200 firefighters, who have flown in from as far as Florida, North Carolina, Arkansas, Idaho, Montana, Utah and Alaska, have been battling the fire around the clock. Until now, the fire has grown by an average of 4,000 acres every 12 hours, and officials are worried that increased wind early this week might provide further fuel for the already immense blaze.

Police are reporting that the fire was started by arson. Wayne Allen Huntsman was arrested and has pled not guilty to the felony charge of starting the week-old fire. Huntsman is being held on \$10 million bail. California Governor Jerry Brown seized on the charges against Huntsman to sign a bill greatly enlarging the penalties imposed for some arson fires. The bill will re-impose a measure that lapsed January 1 that allows for sentences of 10 years to life for aggravated arson, or arson causing \$7 million in damage, including firefighting costs.

The state and the news media are seeking to place the blame for the severe wildfire exclusively on the

individual who has been deemed responsible for its outbreak.

Increasingly destructive weather phenomena such as California’s historic drought have taken their toll. While the environmental impacts of global warming are known to be enormous, the major world powers, above all the US government, have actively opposed any serious attempts to address the expanding crisis.

The drought in California, which is in its third year, has made 2014 the driest year in the last 500 years. The drought reached a qualitatively new level during the past month. In the first week of August, the percentage of the state falling under the US Drought Monitor’s highest category “exceptional drought” jumped from 36.49 percent to 58.41 percent, where it has remained since. The majority of northern California was bumped from “extreme” to “exceptional,” which now defines the entire Central Valley region, the heartland of California’s agricultural industries, and most of the northern Sierra Nevada mountain range where the King fire is localized.

Compounding the effects of the drought are historic heat levels for the year, with January-July temperatures breaking the previous record by an average of 1.4 degrees, about 5 degrees above average for these months. Hotter temperatures augment the effects of a drought by reducing mountain snowpack and increasing evaporation from streams and reservoirs, while simultaneously absorbing moisture from trees, plants and soils. The heat increases the amount of water normally needed to irrigate crops and vegetation, and creates the prerequisites for immense wildfires such as the King fire to erupt and spread more rapidly.

The increased heat causes evaporation and dries the land, which in turn reflects more heat upwards, further raising temperatures in a feedback loop manner. As climatologist Kevin Trenberth noted, “The extra heat from the increase in heat trapping gases in the

atmosphere over six months is equivalent to running a small microwave oven at full power for about half an hour over every square foot of the land under the drought.”

The ongoing drought is the most recent of many expressions of the deepened state of climate change, itself caused by the irrational and unplanned nature of production under capitalism. The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, including droughts, heat waves, wildfires, flooding and hurricanes, are undeniably attributable to broader changes in global climate.

In the city of East Porterville (population 7,300) in Tulare County, over 300 homes have completely run out of water and are relying upon an emergency water bottle delivery service set up by a local resident, who has taken out a loan to pay for the bottled water. In a recent report by the US Drought Monitor, all of the top 10 cities in the country most likely to run out of water were located in California, most in the Central Valley. In the cities of Lemoore, Willits, and others across the state, there have been reports of people deemed “water bandits,” accused of siphoning water from fire hydrants and other sources.

The National Interagency Fire Center issued a bulletin last week that warned of continuing “extreme fire behavior,” with Southern California’s peak wildfire season still in the offing. “Expect fires to ignite easier and spread faster due to low live and dead fuel moistures,” the advisory warned, adding that “local and incoming fire personnel need to be aware that fire behavior is exceeding normal expectations for this time of year.”

Last week, the small but intense Boles fire that erupted in Weed, California, palpably demonstrated these dangers. That blaze, one of the smallest of the year at 479 acres, erupted so rapidly that it became the year’s most destructive so far, destroying 143 homes.

The King fire is by far the largest of roughly a dozen wildfires currently raging across the state. Another fire that destroyed 37 homes near Yosemite National Park has been 93 percent contained. More than 7,800 firefighters from across the country are working to contain these fires throughout the state. Cal Fire director Ken Pimlott has expressed concern with the strenuous demands placed upon firefighters, as budget cuts have diminished their numbers to a noticeable

degree during this drought year's intense fire season.

“Nothing is going to change until it rains,” Pimlott said. “And I mean significant rain.” Forecasts show that the drought will likely continue in the coming years, further compounding the crippling strains on fire departments statewide, and causing the output of the state’s enormous agricultural industries to dwindle.



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