

# Drought-fed fire hits California's San Bernardino Mountains

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The Lake Fire, one of several wildfires in the US southwest fueled by high temperatures and drought conditions, now covers 30,000 acres in the San Bernardino Mountains in southern California. The blaze that began on June 17 has destroyed several buildings and forced the evacuation of hundreds of campers in the mountainous area located 90 miles east of Los Angeles.

A fire in the same locale in 2006—designated as the Sawtooth Complex Fire—spread to 70,000 acres, destroying over 50 homes and killing one person. That fire left the area so arid that even nine years later vegetation has not fully returned, decreasing the fuel for the current fire. Due in part to this and to scattered rain over the last week, the firefighters say the blaze is now 70 percent contained and is no longer expanding.

Almost 2,400 firefighters have helped control the current fire, with many coming in from out of state to assist. The city of San Bernardino itself has only about 100 firefighters, about one quarter of the amount recommended by the US Conference of Mayors.

Firefighter staffing has fallen drastically since the city's bankruptcy announcement in 2012, and officials have discussed privatizing the fire department as part of its bankruptcy proceedings. "I think you're going to see a mass exodus from the city of San Bernardino Fire Department," Nathan Cooke, the former fire battalion chief told local media, "The morale is the lowest I've ever seen it, and I was there approximately 15 years."

While fighting wildfires such as these, firefighters work at an exhausting nonstop pace with many working 16-hour shifts. Captain Andy Juarez of the US Forest Service told the *Desert Sun* his team typically sleeps on the ground without tents.

The California drought, now in its fourth year, has worsened every aspect of the fire. With less moisture in

the ground and in the atmosphere, fires which before might not have spread—or started at all—can now quickly spread out over large distances. Said US Forest Service chief Tom Tidwell, "We are seeing wildfires in the United States grow to sizes that were unimaginable just 20 or 30 years ago."

Historically, droughts are not uncommon in California, but the current drought is exacerbated by both the pervasive effects of global warming and by a water distribution system that has always been subordinated to the state's most powerful agribusiness, real estate and financial interests.

This winter was one of California's warmest on record. With little precipitation, the Sierra Nevada snowpack has virtually disappeared. On April 1, when the Department of Water Resources last took official measurements, they found that the snowpack only had five percent of the water it typically held. The previous low was last year, at 25 percent. Snowpack runoff accounts for 30 percent of the state's water supply when it melts in spring.

Climatologists largely attribute the negligible snowpack to higher temperatures and lower precipitation, typically pointing to global warming as the cause for the former. Climatologist Kevin Trenberth told the Think Progress website, "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."

While the Democratic administration of Governor Jerry Brown has ordered homeowners to reduce water usage, there has been no serious governmental effort to regulate water usage by agribusiness. Agribusiness accounts for 80 percent of the state's water usage, but so far the Brown administration has only launched

municipal initiatives and media campaigns calling for people to reduce their individual water use.

Last April Brown issued Executive Order B-29-15, which curtailed domestic water use while putting only cosmetic restriction on politically connected agricultural giants. Under previous emergency legislation, residents violating a water cap could receive fines for up to \$500 per day. Meanwhile, the only “regulation” of agribusiness is a requirement to submit a “drought management plan that describes the actions and measures the supplier will take to manage water demand.”

While the Lake Fire has so far been successfully controlled with relatively minor economic damage, these conditions set the stage for larger fires in the future. Last year’s King Fire covered almost 100,000 acres, destroyed 80 buildings, and injured twelve people. It threatened 12,000 homes and caused over 3,000 people to flee.

Elizabeth Brown, a spokesperson for Cal Fire (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection), warned, “Normally we don’t have those big fires—especially at those elevations—until the end of the season when the fuel has dried out all summer and you have the Santa Ana winds. We know we’ll have a busy fire season. Not until we get those Santa Anas will we truly know how bad.”

While firefighters have bravely battled the blazes, relentless cuts to public services undermine any effort to protect against wildfires. In addition to the San Bernardino city council discussing the privatization of the fire department, the Obama administration’s submitted budget in February included cuts to the Assistance to Firefighters Grant and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response programs by \$5 million each, and a cut to the United States Fire Administration of \$2.4 million.



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