

Wildfires spread in Northern California

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Nearly two dozen wildfires have burned more than 142,000 acres in northern California, prompting Governor Jerry Brown to declare a state of emergency. More than 13,000 people have been ordered to evacuate, with the largest fire, the Rocky Fire near Sacramento, only 20 percent contained. The fires have been fueled by extra dry vegetation as a result of the state's ongoing drought and high temperatures brought on by global warming. According to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, more than 2,900 firefighters are battling the Rocky Fire, while across the state nearly 14,000 firefighters have been mobilized to fight 26 other fires.

At least one firefighter, David Ruhl, who was fighting the Frog Fire in Modoc National Forest, has died from smoke inhalation, according to the U.S. Forest Service. The 142,000 acres that have burned thus far represent nearly three times the state's five-year wildfire average of 48,153 acres for this time of year, based on statistics from Cal Fire. Daniel Berlant, a Cal Fire spokesman, told CNN, "This has been a very fast-moving wildfire, with the dry conditions and the weather not really cooperating with us over the past week."

While the Rocky Fire is not the worst the state has faced so far, the rate at which it has spread is "historically unprecedented," according to Berlant. Over the weekend, more than 20,000 acres burned in only five hours. Cal Fire has reported that most of the fires are 60 percent contained but nevertheless have burned thousands of acres. California's drought, now in its fourth year, has "turned much of the state into a tinderbox," according to Gov. Brown. Temperatures in the areas where the fires have been burning have topped 100 degrees in recent days.

The Rocky Fire has burned through Colusa, Lake and Yolo counties, north of the state's capital of Sacramento. So far that fire has claimed 65,000 acres and destroyed 50 structures, half of them homes. While

lightning strikes have been identified as the main culprit, the state's drought has created a situation where dry brush is fuel for ever greater fires. According to Berlant, "The drought is playing a huge role. With four years of dry conditions, our vegetation, the trees, the brush, are tinder dry."

Last Friday, a state of emergency was issued by Gov. Brown, who called in the National Guard to assist with firefighting efforts. The number of wildfires is on the rise. This year alone saw 3,100 brush fires, 800 more than in the same time frame in 2014. Drought conditions have undoubtedly created a season of "megafires," with big agricultural farms hoarding most of the water. Cal Fire has spent more than \$63 million fighting forest fires since the start of the fiscal year on July 1. The last fiscal year saw Cal Fire spend \$434 million.

Firefighting efforts across the U.S. have gotten more and more expensive and now consume 50 percent of the Forest Service's budget, compared to 16 percent in 1995. They are expected to rise to two-thirds of the budget within 10 years. Funding for the U.S. Fire Administration was cut by \$2.4 million in the Obama Administration's budget last February, and \$5 million was cut from both the Assistance to Firefighters Grant and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response programs.

Meanwhile, agribusiness accounts for 80 percent of the state's water usage, leaving much of the Central Valley dry while working-class residents are given hefty fines if they use too much water.



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