

# Deadly heatwave hits US Southwest

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The first official day of summer in the Northern hemisphere brought record temperatures to many parts of the southwestern United States as a massive heat wave settled over the region on Saturday.

The National Weather Service has issued excessive heat warnings and heat advisories across Nevada, Utah, Arizona and southern California, affecting over 40 million people. The extreme temperatures have also played a role in ongoing wildfires throughout the region. Additional wildfires broke out near Los Angeles on Monday and Tuesday, causing emergency evacuations of over 1,000 additional LA residents.

At least 17 records were shattered on Sunday, as temperatures reached 120 degrees Fahrenheit in Yuma, Arizona; 118 degrees in Phoenix, Arizona; and 109 degrees in Burbank, California. However, most places reached their peak temperatures on Monday, when many records were also broken: 121 degrees in Palm Springs, California; 112 degrees in Lancaster, California; and 131 degrees in Death Valley, California.

Reports of fatalities from heat related emergencies in Arizona have begun to surface, with five separate deaths over the weekend, including two people hiking in Pima County, along with a 28-year-old female trainer and a 25-year-old male hiking in Pinal County.

There are undoubtedly more unreported deaths among more vulnerable sections of the population such as the homeless, who have limited resources for staying hydrated and out of the sun during the day. A spokesman for Central Arizona Shelter Services (CASS) reported that “in Maricopa County [where Phoenix, the state’s largest city, is located], the homeless population is 10 times more likely to die from a heat-related illness than the population at large.” CASS also reported there were lines out the door of people waiting to find relief within the air-conditioned walls of their building.

Los Angeles County has over 46,000 homeless people, second only to New York City. Many cities have opened “cooling centers” for the public, but these facilities are not equipped to hold or provide for all those who are in threatening situations, particularly as power outages continue to spread.

Late Sunday and into Monday, thousands of homes were without power, many of which still remain disconnected. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power alone reported 6,200 customers without electricity as of 9:30 pm Monday night.

The strain on the power grid, due largely to near-record levels of demand by residents seeking to stay cool, was anticipated due to a recent historic natural gas leak that has limited supplies of the fuel used in many power plants. The effects of that man-made disaster, caused by dilapidated infrastructure and inadequate maintenance and inspection, are now producing potentially deadly consequences for thousands of people who are struggling to stay cool without electricity through the triple-digit temperatures.

The response by the state governments to the extreme weather is characterized by unpreparedness and a lack of funding, with no signs of improvement. The recent budget proposal passed by the state legislature in California offers no increase to emergency services despite the current crises.

The extreme temperatures in the Southwest are the result of a meteorological phenomenon referred to as a “heat dome.” This phenomenon occurs when a high-pressure system is formed in the upper atmosphere, forcing hot air back down. These heat domes are frequently deadly. In August 2015, a heat dome resulted in temperatures of up to 165 degrees Fahrenheit in parts of the Middle East, killing dozens and sparking protests.

Many experts are saying that the current heat wave is being exacerbated by the ongoing effects of climate

change. According to National Climatic Data Center meteorologist Jake Crouch, heat domes “are expected to happen more often in the future.” He added that the increase in global temperatures due to man-made global warming is the leading contributing factor.

Deaths due to extreme weather are increasingly common in the United States due to decaying infrastructure, the growth of poverty and the ongoing effects of climate change. Last year, according to statistics compiled by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Weather Service, 522 people were killed and 2,143 injured as a result of extreme weather events, which collectively caused more than \$4.8 billion in property damage.



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