

# Wildfires in California burn three times the average annual acreage

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The American Southwest has seen a number of wildfires crop up in the last month. Though they have not hit major population centers, they have caused significant damage in rural areas and have displaced several thousand people.

This year alone, there have been approximately 3,200 fires covering over three times the average annual acreage. The five-year average for California fires at this time of year is 2,600 fires covering 37,000 acres of land.

The increase in fires can be traced to the ending of the state's five-year drought this year. Above average rainfall during the winter months led to sharp growth in grasses and other underbrush. As temperatures rose during the late spring and early summer months, that newly-dried out underbrush provided massive amounts of kindling for trees and old forest that had been severely dried out and devastated by the drought.

Future wildfires on such a large scale can be expected to continue throughout the summer and into the fall.

Eleven major wildfires raged throughout the state this past week, requiring some 5,000 firefighters to contain them. The largest of these fires, dubbed the Detwiler Fire, spans over 80,000 acres and has come close to Yosemite National Park. It is now nearly contained, but it has destroyed 63 homes and at least 40 additional buildings.

At its peak the fire threatened 1,500 buildings in the nearby city of Mariposa, leading Governor Jerry Brown to declare a state of emergency and a series of evacuation orders across Mariposa county. As of this writing, the last evacuation order has been lifted and residents are continuing to return.

While most wildfires are naturally occurring and are expected seasonally, the extent of their destruction is a function of the resources allocated to containing them.

When fire budgets are cut, response times go down and the effectiveness of firefighting efforts is diminished.

In the case of the Detwiler Fire, the majority of the personnel had to be brought in from Burbank, Glendale, and Pasadena—nearly 300 miles away—to stop the fire from growing out of control. According to a statement from the Glendale fire department, firefighters worked 24-hour shifts to contain the fire. While 24-hour shifts are standard fare for a city firefighter, whose responsibilities include maintaining their station and equipment, those working on wildfires typically only have 16-hour shifts to accommodate the more continuous fieldwork.

Recent California budgets have cut about 5 percent from CalFIRE's budget over the last two years, despite anticipating an increased risk of wildfires driven by global warming. To make up for these cuts, the state has increasingly relied on prison labor.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) operates a system of "conservation camps" where inmates can "volunteer" to help fight wildfires in exchange for time off their sentences. Inmates who participate in this program are paid about \$1.45 a day when doing preventive work, and \$1 per hour when on the line fighting fires. They work 24-hour shifts much more frequently than their counterparts and account for nearly a third of the state's forest firefighters.

The CDCR website boasts that in an average year they supply 3 million person-hours "responding to fires and other emergencies." They further boast their conservation camps are "saving California taxpayers approximately \$100 million" each year.

The work is quite dangerous. In May, Michael Beck, 26, died when he was struck by a falling tree while trying to contain a fire in Del Norte County. He had

been serving a six-year sentence for burglary and was set to be paroled in October. Last year a 22-year-old woman was killed by a falling boulder while fighting fires for the CDCR in Malibu.

At the local level, cities dealing with financial difficulties have slashed fire budgets to stay solvent. The City of San Bernardino, which exited its five-year bankruptcy proceedings in June, has virtually dissolved its own fire department, and is relying on the county fire department for its fire coverage.

Wildfires are “natural disasters” but the ability to prevent and contain them is a social question. The chronic underfunding and understaffing of firefighters in the wealthiest state in the country sets the objective conditions for a real catastrophe.



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