

Wildfires rage in northwestern United States

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14 August 2017

Recent low precipitation thunderstorms have sparked 13 new large wildfires in the northwestern United States.

Forty-seven active large fires are currently burning more than 338,000 acres across California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Only five of these are classified as contained, while dozens more smaller fires have engulfed a further 656,000 acres across the region. Thousands of homes in the nine affected states have been evacuated.

Cities close to the fires, such as Helena, Montana, have issued warnings that children and the elderly, along with those with respiratory problems, heart or lung diseases and smokers should limit their exertion and time spent outdoors. In addition, many of the states impacted have issued bans on small human-made fires such as campfires in order to reduce the probability of even more wildfires cropping up.

As a result of the large number of new fires, the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) raised the National Fire Preparedness Level (PL) to its highest level, PL-5, last Thursday. This signals a high level of wildfire activity, the high risk of even more emerging and the necessity of committing major firefighting resources. There are currently 152 helicopters, 744 fire engines and 15,768 personnel drawn from the local, state, tribal and federal levels deployed to combat the fires.

The last time the wildfire situation in the US was so critical was in 2015, from August 13 to September 6. Then, the NIFC was forced to call in assets from the US military to help in fire suppression, as well as call for international aid from Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Currently, only the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve have been asked to supply extra equipment and personnel, though that could change if the fires continue to spread.

To date, there have been more than 41,500 individual wildfires across the US this year, burning down more than 6.2 million acres of land, nearly 50 percent more than the average over the past 10 years. An article last year in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* indicates that this trend will only continue to get worse. The report found that human-caused climate change has become the primary factor in increased forest fire activity, nearly doubling the expected amount of fires from 1984 to 2015. Climate change has also caused fire seasons to be an average of 78 days longer than they were in 1970.

This problem has been compounded by the stagnant budget of the US Forest Service, which has hovered around \$5.8 billion annually since 2008. Unlike other natural disasters, funding for fighting wildfires is based on a 10-year rolling average, meaning that the costs are based on the past 10 years to predict the costs for the next year. However, this does not account for inflation or the increasing number of wildfires occurring, meaning that each year the probability that a large fire cannot be contained increases.

These issues were detailed in a 2015 report from the agency showing the increasing difficulty it faces in combating wildfires. Due to the increased frequency and severity of fires and the lack of extra funding, it has been forced to increase the amount of its budget dedicated to fire suppression from 16 percent in 1995 to 52 percent in 2015. There has been a corresponding 39 percent decrease in all non-fire personnel and thus a massive drop in programs designed to prevent future wildfires such as forest restoration. The Forest Service has been forced to fight current fires by stealing from its ability to prevent future fires.

In line with his scorched-earth policy towards social programs, President Donald Trump's budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2017-18 includes a \$300 million cut to the Forest Service's wildfire fighting services and \$50

million from its wildfire prevention efforts. These come on top of a general 23 percent reduction of federal funding for volunteer fire departments around the country. While there are, as yet, no predictions on how this will impact the Forest Service's ability to fight wildfires next year, there is little doubt that it will raise even further the potential for an uncontained wildfire.

While the current wildfires have not proven themselves to be direct threats to human life, fire officials are concerned that this could soon be the case. As the peak fire season continues, there are estimates of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of people temporarily migrating to Oregon and Idaho, two of the states with the most fires, to view the August 21 total solar eclipse. Half of the eclipse's path of totality, which stretches from Salem, Oregon to Charleston, South Carolina, travels through areas that are at a high risk of catching on fire.

The danger is two-fold. First, such a large concentration of people means that there is a higher chance of a spark from a stray cigarette or the heat from a tailpipe igniting the dry brush that is often next to state and federal highways, especially as people pull over and stop to view the eclipse. Second, given the increase in traffic, it will be harder for emergency crews to stop the fires and harder for tourists to escape. Officials in small towns are particularly worried about their ability to get to and fight any fires that start while people are traveling to, from or watching the eclipse.

There are already numerous roads, trails, trailheads and campgrounds closed as a result of ongoing fires that are likely to stay closed through August 21. The Whitewater Fire, for example, has forced the Forest Service to close 117,000 acres of roads, trails and wilderness surrounding Mount Jefferson. At least tens of thousands of people were expected to visit the area, which falls right in the middle of the eclipse's path of totality.



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