

# Large wildfires continue to spread in US Northwest

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Twenty-seven large wildfires are currently active throughout Washington and Oregon. Roughly 700,000 acres are in flames, stretching nearly 600 miles from the Diamond Creek Fire in the Okanagon National Forest adjacent to the Canadian border, south to the Miller Complex Fire on the California border.

According to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center, of the 27 large fires (defined as 100-plus acres of woodland or 300-plus acres of grassland), 16 are uncontained. Another 8 smaller fires are active in the region as well.

An extended dry spell—due to a strong high-pressure ridge, which saw minimal precipitation in a normally wetter June to August—had primed the vast Northwest forests for multiple incidents of wildfires. On September 4 and 5, a combination of low humidity, high temperatures and winds gusting to 55 mph intensified many fires, which then expanded rapidly.

One of the two biggest fires is the Diamond Creek Fire in northern Washington, with 105,750 acres burning and which grew by 250 acres overnight while expanding into Canada. Three structures have been lost and \$12.4 million spent so far fighting that fire. In southwestern Oregon, the Chetco Bar Fire, covering 182,284 acres, has caused 30 lost structures and has been 5 percent contained by more than 1,500 firefighters, with \$42.6 million expended since July 12.

Across the entire western states of California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming, over 80 large wildfires are burning 1.4 million acres. Nearly 28,000 firefighters and support personnel are involved in suppressing these fires. This is a huge increase since last month, nearly double the amount of large fires in August. From Monday to Tuesday, the large wildfires grew an additional 12,581 acres.

The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), based in Boise, Idaho, has raised the National Preparedness Level to 5, the highest level. According to the NIFC, this indicates “a high level of wildfire activity and a high level of commitment of wildfire suppression assets (i.e., firefighters, aircraft and engines) to wildfires. Weather and fuel conditions are predicted to continue to be conducive to wildfire ignitions and spread in most of the western US through September and in parts of the Northern Rockies and California through October.”

The situation has become so dire that the NIFC on September 5 requested 200 active-duty military personnel from Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington “to assist with firefighting efforts.” After three days of training, all 200 were to be deployed September 10 to fight the 30,000-acre fire in the Umpqua National Forest, 50 miles east of Roseburg, Oregon.

The Eagle Creek Fire, located 40 miles east of Oregon’s largest city, Portland, began September 2 and then rapidly expanded from 3,200 acres to a current 35,600. So far, the fire is 11 percent contained, slightly changed from late last week, with 1,000 firefighters battling to protect thousands of homes and structures. Approximately 2,000 people have been evacuated, while four homes have been destroyed.

Ash from these fires drifted to the Pacific Coast in some places and blanketed both Seattle and Portland. Meanwhile smoke-filtered sunlight was transformed into a murky orange. Residents, particularly those with health problems, were warned by the National Weather Service to avoid outdoor activity and to stay indoors with the air conditioning on, advice that the considerable homeless populations of both cities would have found difficult to follow. In Spokane, the Air Quality Index reached “hazardous,” the worst of six

levels.

Governors of both states, Democrats Jay Inslee of Washington and Kate Brown of Oregon, declared states of emergency, allowing the use of the National Guard to join the firefighting efforts. States of emergency due to large wildfires had been announced previously in Montana, Arizona, Nevada and California.

Washington and Oregon had been approved in April and August, respectively, for federal disaster assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency due to the winter's extensive damage by storms, floods, landslides and mudslides.

In Oregon, responding to the initial containment of the Eagle Creek Fire, Coast Guard officials Sunday reopened the Columbia River, a major economic artery for the movement of marine traffic. Meanwhile, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) continued its closure of a 54-mile length of Interstate 84, shut down September 4, from Troutdale east to Hood River. Officials anticipate another week until the highway will be allowed to reopen, as workers remove thousands of burned trees and falling rock debris.

The Eagle Creek Fire is alleged to have been started by a 15-year-old boy tossing fireworks from a bridge down a cliff.

The Union of Concerned Scientists has warned that climate change will affect the western United States with higher average annual temperatures than “for the planet as a whole.” The numbers of large wildfires (which they define as over 1,000 acres) has almost doubled since the 1980s, from 140 then to 250 in the 2000-2012 period. In addition, the fire season has grown from five months then to seven months today.

As in every major disaster since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the response of the various levels of government has ranged from minimal to outright indifference. Oregon's official state web site encourages donations of money to fund “voluntary organizations” to assist victims of the fires. The federal government's budget proposal under President Trump has called for a \$350 million cut in funding from the US Forest Service's wildfire fighting and prevention programs. Additionally, a 23 percent cut in federal funding for volunteer fire departments nationally has been proposed.

*The author also recommends:*

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