

Heat wave and climate change drive California fires, now largest in state history

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California's wildfires are continuing to spread. The deadly Carr Fire by Redding and the Mendocino Complex fires have been joined by the Holy Fire in Orange and Riverside counties, which as of Thursday has forced evacuation orders for 20,000 people.

The unusually intense fire season has been driven by a record heat wave and increased volatility in weather patterns flowing from climate change.

Last month was the hottest July on record for California, going back 124 years. The average statewide temperature for the month was 79.7 degrees Fahrenheit, drying out vegetation and setting the stage for a record fire season. Similar extreme conditions have been driving devastating fires across Europe, which experienced its second hottest June in 108 years.

In Greece, where the austerity measures enforced by the SYRIZA government have devastated fire services, the death toll from the July wildfire outside Athens has risen to 93. In Sweden, fires have burned more than 50,000 acres, roughly ten times the yearly average, in a country unaccustomed to any major forest fires.

In California, the Mendocino Complex has grown to become the largest wildfire in state history, burning 304,402 acres. It is still only 51 percent contained. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) is estimating that it will take three more weeks to fully contain it.

The Carr Fire claimed an eighth life Thursday, shortly after midnight, when a heavy equipment mechanic, Jason Andrew Brake, 40, crashed on Rte. 99. Details of the crash have not been released, but many firefighters work 24 hours or more in a single shift to contain these fires. The Carr Fire, which has destroyed over 1,000 residential buildings and burned 177,450 acres, is only 48 percent contained. CAL FIRE has no estimate for when they will achieve full containment.

In Southern California, the Holy Fire began Monday afternoon in the Cleveland National Forest near Lake Elsinore. It grew rapidly to 9,600 acres and now threatens over 7,000 houses. Its perimeter is only 5 percent contained, and it borders densely populated urban areas.

Police arrested an individual who is accused of starting the Holy Fire on Thursday. Whatever the specific circumstances behind the blaze, however, it and the other fires have been fed by extreme conditions produced by climate change and the absence of systematic planning.

Wildfires across California have burned 750,000 acres so far this year, well above the five-year average of 129,000. Thirteen people have died in this year's fires, and tens of thousands have been ordered to evacuate. Last year was the most destructive fire season on record, with more than 9,000 buildings destroyed, 43 people killed and over \$13 billion in damages.

California's fires have been particularly devastating because of a growing volatility in weather patterns. The heavy rains of 2017 caused significant vegetation growth, and then this year's unusually dry and hot summer dried all those plants out to provide easily combustible fuel. Years of extreme drought before 2017 killed millions of trees, intensifying any fire that does break out.

That volatility is symptomatic of broader shifts in weather patterns resulting from climate change. Storms, cold fronts and other weather phenomena in North America are closely tied to the jet stream that circulates air at high speeds from West to East.

The shape and speed of the jet stream depend on the temperature difference between the Arctic and the Equator. As the Arctic warms up, the jet stream slows, and weather events start to linger, leading to larger

downpours when it rains and longer dry spells when it does not.

Overall, climate change is expected to significantly increase the number and size of fires in California. A 2015 study by University of California researchers predicts the area burned by fires to grow by over 60 percent in the next few decades and the number of structures burned each year to grow by more than two-thirds (assuming no additional housing development).

Climate change brought on by capitalism's degradation of the environment sets the stage for disaster, but a social crisis is not inevitable. Under a rationally planned economy, a small fraction of society's wealth is all it would take to maintain a healthy wilderness resistant to large fires through controlled burns and the removal of dead trees, to properly house people in fire-resistant buildings, and to have proper disaster infrastructure to evacuate and house people in the event of the unforeseen.

The financial aristocracy is funneling the wealth of society into unprecedented private profits and sheer brutality. CAL FIRE's emergency response budget of \$424 million is less than what Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos makes in two days. The entire \$1.8 billion budget of CAL FIRE is only two-thirds the cost of a Virginia-class nuclear attack submarine, two of which are in the recent bipartisan Pentagon budget.

Unwilling to address any of the actual issues surrounding the fires, President Trump fired off a right-wing attack on environmental laws. "California wildfires are being magnified & made so much worse by the bad environmental laws which aren't allowing massive amounts of readily available water to be properly utilized," he tweeted Monday. "It is being diverted into the Pacific Ocean."

The tweet sought to rally layers of large farmers in the Central Valley that had suffered from lack of water under the historic drought of 2011-17, in opposition to environmental restrictions on business. It bears no relation to how wildfires are fought or how California's water is apportioned.

For their part, California's Democrats, who have run the state government from top to bottom since 1970, have no progressive response to the disaster. In fact, 30 to 40 percent of the state's wilderness firefighters are prisoners who work 24-plus-hour shifts in 100-degree heat clearing firebreaks for \$1 an hour.

Far from being shamefaced over using forced labor, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation posted a tweet bragging about the program. According to the tweet, "58 young offenders" are subjected to these brutal conditions. In 2017, two prisoners died fighting wildfires. It is a sign of the brutality of the state government that it would brag about the use of child prison labor.



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