

# California wildfires kill nine, drive 150,000 from their homes

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Early Thursday morning, a small fire started along the Feather River in Northern California. Due to high winds and dry conditions, the fire spread rapidly to the west, and by Friday evening had burned 90,000 acres and erased the town of Paradise (population 26,000) from the map. The Camp Fire, named after the creek where it started, forced the entire city to flee on short notice, creating traffic jams and chaos.

Families stuck in traffic had to flee the rapidly approaching flames on foot. The road to Paradise is now littered with the burned-out remains of abandoned cars. So far, nine people are confirmed dead in this catastrophe. Five of the victims were trapped in cars that were overtaken by the fire.

Many more people are reported missing. A spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) said of the first five, who were found on Friday, that “the only reason they found the five is because they were still on the road.” So far, search and rescue teams have been blocked by the flames from systematic work in the destroyed town. Social media are flooded with the posts of families looking for relatives they have not been able to contact.

The Camp Fire is now threatening Chico (population 93,000), the largest city in Butte County.

Cal Fire estimates that the Camp Fire has destroyed at least 6,700 structures and threatens 15,000 more. It is currently only 5 percent contained, and officials say they do not expect full containment until the end of the month.

Butte County officials made the disastrous decision Thursday not to send a wireless emergency alert to all the cell phones in Paradise. Instead, they used a list of those who had opted to receive emergency alerts or who had landlines. As the fire began rapidly to spread into the city, many were left unaware, dropping their

kids off at school and heading to work.

The same lack of systematic emergency warnings contributed to the deaths of 22 people when the Tubbs Fire swept through a working-class neighborhood in Santa Rosa early one morning in October of 2017. Many residents in the Sonoma County city were awakened only by the approaching fire.

Dry, windy conditions statewide also spread two other major fires Thursday in Ventura County near Thousand Oaks. The famous Santa Ana winds were 20 to 30 miles per hour strong across the region, driving hot, dry air westward, with gusts as high as 50 miles per hour.

As of Friday afternoon, the Woolsey Fire had burned 35,000 acres and the Hill Fire, 4,500. These fires broke out in a more densely populated area, threatening 25,750 structures and forcing the evacuation of roughly 100,000 people, including the entire city of Malibu in the western part of Los Angeles County. A smaller fire near Griffith Park forced the closure of the Los Angeles Zoo and the evacuation of some of the animals.

Any one of these fires could jump out of control or new ones could start in populated areas. Roughly 23 million Californians are currently under “red flag” fire warnings, meaning the conditions exist for wildfires to spread rapidly.

The impact of these fires extends far beyond the area burned. Those who have lost homes will have to try to rebuild while fighting to get even meager insurance payments. Housing prices, already well beyond the reach of most workers, will go up. Ash from the Camp Fire has spread across Northern California, including the heavily populated Bay Area, leading to air quality health advisories.

The State of California has declared the fire an emergency, but its response is pitifully insufficient. For

two years in a row the state has faced record wildfires. In July, the Mendocino Complex burned 459,000 acres, the largest wildfire in state history. Last year's Thomas Fire in December came in second, burning 281,000 acres and destroying over 1,000 buildings. The Tubbs Fire that ravaged Santa Rosa in October of last year destroyed 5,600 buildings, making it the most destructive wildfire in state history.

Wildfires have been a regular occurrence in California since before humans settled there, but behind every "natural" disaster is a story of government indifference and social inequality that compounds a natural occurrence and transforms it into a social catastrophe. California's fires have become more destructive as a result of global warming, the housing crisis and the squandering of society's wealth to bolster the private fortunes of corporate oligarchs.

Climate change has increased the volatility of California's weather patterns, leading to sharper shifts between periods of drought and heavy rainfall, resulting in larger wildfires. The 2011-2017 drought was the driest period since records began in 1895, and it was quickly followed by heavy rain in 2017. This fall has again seen extremely dry weather. When it does rain, vegetation grows rapidly only to dry into fuel for fires during the next drought.

These bigger fires are now sweeping into more heavily populated areas, as workers flee the high housing prices in cities to more sparsely populated suburbs and rural towns. Wildfires are fought with controlled burns and firebreaks, which are impossible to set up in populated areas. City fires are fought with complete suppression, which is impossible over an area of thousands of acres.

The spread of this wild land-urban interface requires carefully managed state and national fire control programs and modern construction to prevent wildfires from crossing into populated areas.

The wealth to support all the victims of wildfires, solve the housing crisis and prevent further disasters is readily available, but is channeled into wars abroad, the persecution and mass detention of immigrants, and the further enrichment of the capitalist ruling class.

Cal Fire had an emergency response budget of \$443 million this year, \$431 million of which was already spent suppressing the fires in July and August. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is projected to

spend nearly \$300 million deploying the military and National Guard to the Mexican border in order to turn away asylum seekers. California's Democratic Governor Jerry Brown, who has been in office since 2011 and overseen the surge in fatal fires, also authorized the deployment of hundreds of the state's national guard at Trump's request to the border.



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