

# More fires ignite as wildfire season deepens in California

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Five additional wildfires broke out in Southern California on Wednesday as the state descends further into wildfire season, which has dramatically intensified due to climate change and decades of corporate and governmental negligence. At present, Cal Fire reports 11 active fires statewide, with the largest remaining the Kincade Fire in Sonoma County, which has burned over 76,000 acres and is only 60 percent contained.

Reports have surfaced indicating that a Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) transmission line malfunctioned near the point of origin of the Kincade Fire, potentially implicating the utility monopoly in yet another in a long line of devastating wildfires. Similarly, four of the other active fires in Southern California are believed to have been caused by malfunctioning transmission lines or downed power lines, under the purview of Southern California Edison (SCE), the main utility monopoly in the region.

The five new fires include the Hillside Fire in San Bernardino, the 46 Fire and Hill Fire in Riverside, the Easy Fire in Ventura and the Copper Fire in San Diego, which have burned a combined 2,700 acres as of this writing.

The Hill Fire has prompted mandatory evacuations and has already destroyed six homes, while the 46 Fire has burned at least five buildings. Both fires have been fueled by powerful Santa Ana winds, which are expected to continue, as the National Weather Service said the dangerous “red flag” conditions in Southern California would remain at least through Thursday evening.

In Simi Valley, northwest of Los Angeles, flames from the Easy Fire came close to damaging the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library as well as nearby neighborhoods, and have forced roughly 30,000 people to evacuate their homes. The fire broke out just before

dawn Wednesday and was fueled by wind gusts of up to 70 mph, with residents telling local media, “we only had seconds to get out.”

Meanwhile, firefighters have made “significant progress” on the Kincade Fire in Northern California, according to Cal Fire representative Jonathan Cox. At present, roughly 5,000 residents remain under evacuation orders, while at its peak the fire forced an estimated 200,000 people to evacuate the surrounding region.

The fire has destroyed 141 homes, while more than 90,000 structures remain threatened. Further, at least 53,000 homes and businesses across Northern California remain impacted by PG&E power shutoffs, after the company cut electricity to millions in a desperate attempt to prevent new fires.

The impact of global warming on wildfires has been increasingly verified through scientific research. A recent study published in the journal *Earth's Future* found that, “Since the early 1970s, California’s annual wildfire extent increased fivefold, punctuated by extremely large and destructive wildfires in 2017 and 2018.”

The researchers concluded, “This trend was mainly due to an eightfold increase in summertime forest-fire area and was very likely driven by drying of fuels promoted by human-induced warming.”

The study notes that the moisture deficit—the difference between the amount of water currently in the atmosphere and the amount of water it can hold—has not caught up over the past decade as average temperatures have risen over 2 degrees Fahrenheit. This lower relative humidity causes vegetation to dry out faster, creating fuel for fires.

The conclusion of the study pointed to a spiraling feedback loop in which the severity and regularity of

fires increases as a result of accelerating global warming, in turn producing further greenhouse gas emissions, thus worsening global warming and creating more fires.

Indeed, 14 of the 20 worst fires in Californian history have happened since 2007, with the state having 78 more annual “fire days” than it did half a century ago. While 2018 was the worst year in terms of destruction and lives lost, each year is now set to surpass the previous records. A state commissioned report found that the average burn area in California will increase 77 percent by the end of the century.

Cal Fire, the main state agency tasked with fighting fires, has spent \$4.7 billion in the last ten years alone. The agency’s funds are usually depleted a few months into the new year, leaving very little resources to clear out overgrown forests and help residents prepare for future fires.

As a result of the insufficient funding of Cal Fire, the state increasingly exploits prison labor to battle fires. California has some 3,100 inmates in the Conservation Camp program to help authorities with emergencies, of whom 2,150 are allowed to fight fires. They are paid a minuscule \$2.90 to \$5.12 a day, plus an additional \$1 an hour while fighting fires, turning one of society’s most important occupations into virtual slave labor.

Despite the deadly conditions in these prisoners’ firefighting battalions, those employed are unable to become firefighters or emergency responders once they leave prison, due to their criminal records.

Democrat Governor Gavin Newsom, for all his rhetoric about PG&E’s “greed” and “mismanagement,” has made clear that the state is more interested in shoring up the financial wealth of the utility companies than aiding working people affected by the fires.

So far the state has created a \$21 billion compensation fund to pay for future claims against the utility companies, which will be paid for with equal contributions from the companies and their customers, including the victims of fires caused by their faulty equipment.

Newsom has also mandated the three largest utilities to invest a total of \$5 billion to upgrade and fireproof their equipment. In an interview with Capital Public Radio, Newsom was asked if the state had “the power to force PG&E to pay customers for their losses that

were the result of the blackout?”

Newsom’s answer was that the state would try to make PG&E “do the right thing” but ultimately, it was an “open question” and the company “may not be legally required” to do anything.

The cost of wildfires on state finances has taken a heavy toll, as the state has surpassed its annual firefighting budget in seven of the last ten years. In 2018 alone, the state spent nearly \$1 billion on firefighting, far exceeding the budget of \$450 million.

The financial cost shouldered by homeowners is staggering as well, with \$10 billion in insured losses each year over the past two fire seasons. The lingering air pollution causes local air districts to issue warnings to wear masks and avoid outdoor exercise. Thousands of residents have gone to the emergency room for respiratory illnesses, which can continue for months and cause long-term damage to the most vulnerable segments of the population.



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