

Seven dead and 170,000 displaced as massive wildfires continue to burn in Northern California

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At least seven people have died in fires raging across Northern California, including a helicopter pilot who crashed while fighting a fire in Mt. Hood National Forest, three people found in a hillside bunker in Napa Valley, a Pacific Gas & Electric employee who died from smoke inhalation while assisting firefighters, a male Solano County resident, and on Sunday, a 70-year-old man from Santa Cruz County. At least 33 people have been injured, and at least two are missing.

The fires began early last week after thunderstorms produced by a tropical storm resulted in over 13,000 dry-lightning strikes, setting off hundreds of small fires, which merged into massive “fire complexes.” The fires were fueled by strong winds and a severe heatwave, which has affected much of the western United States over the past week and caused rolling blackouts throughout the state. Unusually dry air and wide areas of critically dry vegetation—part of a decades-long shift in the region’s climate toward greater aridity—have caused the fires to burn more intensely and closer to populated areas than in the past.

The three largest fire complexes are burning on all sides of the heavily-populated San Francisco Bay Area, not far from the eastern edge of San Jose. As of Monday night, the SCU Lightning Complex to the southeast had burned 363,000 acres (568 square miles) and was 15 percent contained; the LNU Lightning Complex to the northeast had burned 352,000 acres (551 square miles) and was 27 percent contained; and the CZU Lightning Complex to the south had burned 78,000 acres (109 square miles) and was 17 percent contained. The August Lightning Complex further north had burned 181,000 acres (283 square miles) and was 11 percent contained.

As of Tuesday morning, 937 structures have been destroyed and 251 damaged, and the fires continue to threaten some 30,500 additional structures, according to Cal Fire, California’s fire agency.

The National Weather Service has set air quality alerts for

much of California’s Central Valley, and parts of Oregon, Idaho, and Colorado. The San Francisco Bay and Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley regions have spent days covered in a thick haze of smoke, and the concentration of fine particulate matter in the Bay Area has reached roughly five times the daily limit set by the EPA.

“Even healthy people are reporting headaches, bloody noses, etc., during this current smoke event,” said Coty Jen, assistant professor at the Center for Atmospheric Particle Studies at Carnegie Mellon University.

“Most of the Bay Area dodged a bullet,” said meteorologist Roger Gass, after lightning strikes projected for Sunday and Monday—which could have caused another round of ignitions—proved to be less severe than expected.

Lightning strikes ignited ten more fires Monday night in other parts of the state, but cooler, more humid weather has allowed firefighters to increase the containment of the largest fire complexes. However, a return to dryer and hotter conditions is expected later in the week, and Cal Fire officials say the fires could take weeks to contain, warning that “this is going to be a marathon.”

Some 50,000 evacuees were allowed to return to their homes starting Sunday, but about 170,000 remain evacuated. While schools, auditoriums, and public buildings have been turned into makeshift evacuation shelters, many evacuees are rightly reluctant to crowd into enclosed shelters amid the COVID-19 pandemic. California has one of the highest infection rates in the country, with more than 6,000 new cases reported on average each day.

Hotels across much of the Bay Area are booked with evacuees, with far too few rooms for the thousands in need of temporary housing. With few hotel vouchers available, many of those dealing with the economic devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including thousands of low-wage immigrant workers and the unemployed, are unable to afford hotels and basic provisions.

Guerneville resident Rhonda Hall left her low-income

apartment last Tuesday with her two children and 70-year-old mother and headed for a hotel in Vacaville. By the time they arrived, ash was falling from the sky, and they were forced to leave—without a refund—to find another hotel. “Everything was booked or on fire,” Hall told the *Mercury News*, and the family was forced to go as far as Reno, Nevada to find a room. “I just want this nightmare to be over,” Hall said. “It’s been horrible.”

Evacuees are being directed to parking lots, parks, campgrounds, and other open spaces, where countless thousands have been forced to live out of their cars, often with little or no aid, in the midst of an historic heatwave that has sent temperatures above 100 degrees Fahrenheit in much of inland California.

“I’m camping in the Prius,” 69-year-old Cheryl Jarvis told the *San Francisco Chronicle* last Thursday from the crowded parking lot of the Vacaville Community Center. “It’s not real comfortable, but I’m so tired it didn’t matter.”

Some 14,000 firefighters were deployed as of Monday, about 96 percent of California’s available personnel. The extraordinary combination of four massive fire complexes and countless smaller fires has completely overwhelmed California’s chronically underfunded firefighting infrastructure. “The size and complexity in this fire is not one that we’ve seen in times past,” said Cal Fire unit chief Shana Jones.

In a typical year, 30-40 percent of California’s firefighting personnel are prison inmates, paid around one dollar per hour to risk their lives as modern-day indentured servants. The COVID-19 pandemic has swept through California’s notoriously overcrowded prison system, infecting more than 12,000 inmates and guards, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. As a result, less than half of the state’s inmate firefighting crews will be available this season.

Under these conditions, some firefighting crews have had to work 72-hour shifts with no breaks, according to Cal Fire spokesman Daniel Berlant, even as they are subject to smoke inhalation and rapidly moving fire. Two firefighters in Marin County nearly lost their lives Friday after they were surrounded by a wall of flames while fighting the Woodward Fire.

The SCU and LNU complex fires are, respectively, the second and third largest wildfires in California history, surpassed only by the 2018 Mendocino Complex Fire. The 2020 fire season is already the fourth largest on record for the state, with more than 7,000 fires having burned more than 1.4 million acres (2,000 square miles), an area larger than the state of Delaware.

In the past fifty years, summer forest fires in California have increased in size by about 800 percent, and the ten

most destructive fire seasons on record in terms of area burned have all taken place since 2008. According to the Congressional Research Service, the average yearly acreage burned nationwide every year since 2000 is more than double the average burned during the 1990s.

“We are essentially living in a megafire era,” said Jake Hess, Cal Fire unit chief for Santa Clara, “We have folks who have been working for Cal Fire for the last five years and that’s all they understand – megafires – since they started.”

While the Trump Administration has continued a decade-long trend in cutting federal funding for fire science, including \$2 billion in cuts from the US Forest Service budget, while threatening to cut off federal aid for California wildfires, the Democratic Party that dominates California politics is no less responsible for preparing the disaster which is currently unfolding.

Under conditions in which climate change has extended the fire season year-round and caused summer megafires to become a practically yearly occurrence, the state has systematically defunded social infrastructure, cut firefighter staffing, closed stations, and taken no substantial action to mitigate the danger of wildfires.

In 2018, Cal Fire exhausted its \$442.8 million wildfire budget in the middle of the season and had to obtain emergency funding.

California Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom’s administration has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by passing a \$54 billion budget cut targeting health and social services, which includes a 10 percent pay cut for state workers, including firefighters. Meanwhile, the five richest billionaires in California accrued \$70 billion during the first three months of the pandemic, enough to pay the state’s average wildfire budget more than a hundred times over.



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