

Wildfires continue to rage across California amidst heat wave and pandemic

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27 August 2020

Fires, ash and disease continue to rage throughout much of the West Coast of the United States. Record-breaking heat waves and fires sparked by powerful lightning storms have torn through several areas of California over the past week, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The scene is apocalyptic as fires rage throughout much of northern California, with a smoke-filled haze covering the dense San Francisco Bay Area and statewide heat waves prompting utility companies to induce rolling power outages.

So far this year, more than 7,000 fires have decimated over 1.6 million acres (2,500 square miles), an area larger than the state of Delaware, to make this fire season one of the most active in California history. In comparison, by August of 2019, some 4,292 fires had burned 56,000 acres across the state.

According to Cal Fire, California's fire agency, there are currently over 650 active fires of varying sizes, which have so far destroyed over 2,000 structures and killed at least seven people.

Hundreds of small fires began after thunderstorms hit on the night of August 17, resulting in over 13,000 dry-lightning strikes, which led to massive "fire complexes." Strong winds and a severe heat wave have exacerbated the situation, creating the second and third largest fires in California history.

The most destructive of the blazes, the LNU Lightning Complex in the northern San Francisco Bay Area counties of Napa, Lake and Sonoma, has destroyed close to 1,000 buildings. It continues to threaten about 30,000 more buildings and has killed at least five people.

As of Wednesday morning, the fire had been 33 percent contained. There are currently over 2,200 firefighting personnel battling the blaze, and Cal Fire

authorities are reminding residents to stay on high alert to be prepared to leave at any moment.

Of the five people killed by the LNU Lightning Complex fire, three were found in a hillside bunker in Napa Valley, a Pacific Gas & Electric employee died from smoke inhalation while assisting firefighters, and a male Solano County resident was killed.

The SCU Lightning Complex grew to become the second largest wildfire in California state history after surpassing the acreage of the LNU Lightning Complex on Monday. Only the 2018 Mendocino Complex was larger.

The fire, threatening residents east of Silicon Valley proper in Santa Clara, Alameda, Stanislaus, Contra Costa and San Joaquin counties, has destroyed nearly 40 structures and threatens over 20,000 more. Currently, five people have been injured with burn wounds from the fire, including three firefighters. Fire activity has lessened due to lighter winds and increased humidity, but the fire still remains at only 25 percent containment as of Wednesday afternoon.

The third of the large fire complexes, the CZU Complex, has destroyed over 530 structures throughout Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties, south of San Francisco. Cal Fire reported progress in containing the fire for the first time on Wednesday, but the fire remains at 19 percent containment and officials warn that the trend could change if weather conditions worsen. Most devastatingly, the fire has led to the indefinite closure of Big Basin Redwoods State Park, the oldest in California and home to redwood trees hundreds of years old, which have been completely destroyed.

Pollution from the smoke of multiple fires burning at once has significantly worsened air quality across California and southern parts of Oregon. Officials

project that the air quality index (AQI) for Northern and Central California will remain at levels up to three times the acceptable range set by the Environmental Protection Agency until at least Sunday.

Polluted air has the potential to weaken the immune systems of otherwise healthy people. This makes the situation all the more dire in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, like smoke inhalation, affects the respiratory system. California already has one of the highest infection rates in the country, with more than 6,000 new cases reported on average each day. Studies suggest that areas with higher levels of air pollution correlate to higher COVID-19 infection rates.

The coronavirus pandemic has compounded the stresses faced by the more than 100,000 people who have been forced to evacuate areas affected by wildfires. Those who would otherwise choose to take refuge in the homes of relatives or friends are having second thoughts, for fear of infecting loved ones or contracting the virus from them.

Bay Area hotels remain booked up with evacuees and there are far too few rooms to house the thousands in need of temporary housing. With hotel vouchers now unavailable, thousands of workers and unemployed are directed to parking lots, parks, campgrounds and other open spaces, where thousands have been forced to live out of their cars, often with little or no aid, in the midst of temperatures above 100 degrees Fahrenheit in much of inland California.

Aridity and heat waves have intensified in the last few decades as a direct result of manmade climate change. Summer forest fires in California have increased in size by about 800 percent over the last 50 years, and the 10 most destructive fire seasons on record in terms of area burned have all taken place since 2008.

The average yearly acreage burned nationwide every year since 2000 is more than double the average burned during the 1990s, according to the Congressional Research Service. In recent years, flames have sparked in ecosystems that do not normally have wildfires. Fires are common in dry grass and chaparral, but are now occurring in redwood and coniferous forests.

To make matters worse, the heat wave has led utility companies to enforce rolling blackouts because the outdated infrastructure risks sparking even more fires, cutting power to 130,000 people in southern California

and 220,000 people in the Central Coast and Central Valley areas.

Last year, Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) implemented the first series of enforced power outages, allegedly to prevent fire from sparking in the event that PG&E power lines fell during dry and windy conditions. PG&E was found earlier this year to be guilty of over 80 counts of involuntary manslaughter for the deaths caused by downed power lines that sparked the 2018 Camp Fire.

Despite the predictability of the annual fires and the techniques to remove shrubbery that would prevent massive fires, there is nowhere near the number of fire crews, airplanes and helicopters needed to put out the fires. In a given year, the state relies on over 2,200 cheap prison laborers to risk their lives battling fires for \$2-5 dollars a day, but this year most are currently unavailable due to an early release initiative aimed at limiting the spread of the coronavirus in the state's prisons.

Moreover, California's Democratic governor, Gavin Newsom, signed a budget in June that would slash over \$50 billion in state spending, including a \$681 million cut in environmental protection. This would only heighten the danger under conditions where repeated cuts in funding for social infrastructure, including fire departments, have contributed to the current wildfire crisis.

In the wealthiest state, home to 154 billionaires—the largest number in the US—as well as Silicon Valley and the Hollywood film studios, the resources exist to mitigate and prepare for the annual fire season, fully staff the fire departments, upgrade aging energy infrastructure, clear dry vegetation and implement controlled burns. However, under capitalism all aspects of life are subordinated to the enrichment of a tiny elite.



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