

False “glimmers of hope” as California continues to burn

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Over 730 fires have raged across California since August 15 as a trend of warm, dry weather coupled with thousands of dry lightning strikes has set the state ablaze. Seven people have been confirmed dead, including a helicopter pilot, an unidentified family of three, a Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) utility employee, a Solano County male resident, and a 70-year-old man from Santa Cruz County. At least two people are missing, and tens of thousands of evacuees remain displaced from their homes.

The past two weeks have seen an unprecedented number of thunder and lightning storms in northern California, kindling dry brush and chaparral, and growing into enormous fields of fires. The fires have been exacerbated by a record heat wave and low humidity, leading to thousands of dry lightning strikes and leaving much of the landscape vulnerable to fire activity.

Although California is known for its vulnerability to the wildfire seasons, with each passing year, the number and size of the fires seem to grow ever larger, especially over the past two decades. Scenes like that of the Mendocino fire of 2018—the state’s largest fire to date—or the Cedar fire of 2003 have become more and more commonplace, year after year.

Over the past couple of days, minor progress had been made in elevations below 2,000 feet due to cooler weather conditions and higher humidity, but in higher elevations, the arid conditions have continued, and firefighters are still being pushed past their limits. There are currently over 14,600 firefighters on the ground from throughout the state, as well as from the East Coast, and from Australia.

So far, 3.3 million gallons of fire retardant and 4.6 million gallons of water have been used in an effort to the limit the damage done by the fires, which have

engulfed 1.6 million acres, an area larger than the state of Delaware. So far, there have been over 7,000 fires this year, significantly higher than the 4,292 record through August in 2019.

Although Cal Fire offered language of “glimmers of hope” from their Daily Wildfire Report Friday morning, the fires are still raging. Nearly two dozen major fires are still burning, along with hundreds of smaller ones, including one that started in the early hours of Friday.

Of the larger wildfires, the SCU Lightning Complex fire has burned 372,971 acres, and is 35 percent contained; the LNU Lightning Complex has burned 371, 249 acres, and is also 35 percent contained; the August Complex fire has burned 212,010 acres, and is 18 percent contained; in the CZU Lightning Complex, 82,540 acres have burned, and it is 26 percent contained.

The SCU Lightning Complex wildfire has since overtaken the LNU Lightning Complex wildfire as the second largest wildfire in California state history. While Cal Fire Officer Daniel Berlant seemed hopeful that the fires are being contained, the forecast going into the weekend and into next week will continue to be hot and dry (temperatures in the mid-90s to low 100s Fahrenheit), with very little humidity.

Additionally, the smoke and ash in the air have made the air quality very poor, especially in Central and Northern California and in southern parts of Oregon. The Air Quality Index is expected to remain at levels of up to three times the acceptable range until at least Sunday. Not only are those with pulmonary conditions more likely to suffer more, but the polluted air may compromise their immune systems further, leaving them more vulnerable to the coronavirus. Yet, even the immune systems of otherwise healthy people will be

affected adversely, as well, with studies suggesting that higher rates of coronavirus infection correlate to higher levels of COVID-19 infection rates.

In the face of the fires, hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to evacuate their homes. Over 925 homes and other buildings had been destroyed by the LNY Lightning Fires Complex. The CZU Lightning Complex destroyed at least 330 buildings and burned almost 79,000 acres.

“As the damage assessment continues, it’s important for everyone to realize that this is a time when some people will realize they no longer have homes,” Sheriff Mark Essick of Sonoma County told the *New York Times* on Tuesday. “They are going to be experiencing considerable losses.”

This scenario is playing out throughout Northern and Central California. Many people have had to relocate to makeshift shelters such as local schools, campgrounds and parks. In light of the ongoing pandemic, thousands have had to stay in their cars or with family to prevent sharing accommodations with hundreds of other evacuees.

For others who have had to readjust to the “new normal” under the coronavirus pandemic, the fires pose a new challenge. For many elementary, junior high, and high school students, who were just days into the new school year, via remote learning, classes were canceled in order to address the new crisis.

Lauren Gammon, a 16-year-old junior at Vacaville High School, told the *New York Times* that, while her home was spared, her boyfriend’s was not. “It was really heartbreaking to hear that his house was gone,” she stated. It has been estimated that over 12,000 homes and structures have been burned so far and evacuations are still in effect for at least 83,000 people. In the Bay Area, many hotels are at capacity, and those who would otherwise be eligible for hotel vouchers have had to relocate to the temporary shelters.

While the latest spate of fires is once again being passed off as a “natural disaster,” there has been no question that the increased number of fires and extent of the damage wrought by them is due in significant part to human-induced climate change. Yet little is being done to mediate the effects of global warming, or to increase the amount of resources available to fight the fires. President Trump’s administration has continued to cut federal funding for fire science,

including \$2 billion in cuts from the US Forest Service Budget.

Furthermore, in California, a state dominated by their party, Democratic politicians are responsible for cutting firefighter staff, the closing of multiple fire stations, and have taken little action to curb the very real dangers of wildfires that become exceedingly out of control. Governor Gavin Newsom himself supported the cutting of \$681 million from the state budget for environmental protection.



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