

Oregon governor declares state of emergency calling wildfires a “once-in-a-generation event”

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As multiple fires continue to decimate the west coast of the United States, Oregon Governor Kate Brown declared a wildfire emergency after two towns were burnt to the ground and thousands of residents were ordered to evacuate. The US Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest Region stated that at least 20 large wildfires burning across Washington and Oregon have destroyed some 476,027 acres.

In a press conference, Governor Brown called the “extreme fire weather” conditions a “once-in-a-generation event.” She told reporters, “Almost every year since becoming Governor, I’ve witnessed historic fire seasons. Yet this is proving to be an unprecedented and significant fire event for our state.” She told residents to brace for what could be “the greatest loss of life and structures due to wildfire in state history.”

A 12-year-old boy and his grandmother were reportedly killed in the community of Lyons, about 50 miles south of Portland, while a one-year-old boy was killed and his parents severely burned attempting to escape a fire in Okanogan County, in Washington. Fires have also claimed a life, north of Ashland, Oregon, according to officials.

Brown invoked the state’s Emergency Conflagration Act to fight the three largest fires, including the Beachie Creek, Lionshead and Holiday Farm fires. The Beachie Creek and Lionshead fires have burned more than 200,000 acres each, with the Lionshead fire only 31 percent contained. The Holiday Farm fire has destroyed some 37,000 acres forcing thousands of residents to flee.

Residents of the city of Medford in the southern part of the state have been ordered to evacuate because of a wildfire that has closed a 25-mile portion of Interstate

5. The fire is zero percent contained and nearby communities have been told to evacuate. Fire officials told the media that they could not determine if anyone had died or been hurt but that there were many successful rescue missions.

Residents told local media they had only moments to get out before the fires came. Sabrina Kent told FOX12 she evacuated her parents after a fire started near Salem, and then moved to get her own family out. “We drove under a tree that had fallen over and there was burning limbs and it was like urgent and scary to get out,” she said. Her family was forced to move a third time, from her brother’s house, after the wildfire approached there.

A major evacuation center was set up in Salem at the Oregon State Fairgrounds, one of at least 10 fire evacuation centers set up by the Red Cross. Chad Carter, a spokesman for the Red Cross, told the Associated Press that 600 evacuees had checked into the site by early Tuesday afternoon.

An estimated 1,450 inmates from three prisons were also evacuated because of the fires, according to the Oregon Department of Corrections. Several Oregon school districts were also forced to postpone the first day of school because of power outages and evacuations.

In Washington, more acres were burned by Monday than in the past 12 fire seasons according to Governor Jay Inslee. The town of Malden was 80 percent destroyed, including its fire station, post office, city hall and library. Statewide, the fires have torched more than 330,000 acres.

Red flag warnings remain across western Oregon and Washington as high winds continue throughout the

region. The National Weather Service office in Portland tweeted, “The worst of the winds are behind us, however, there is still plenty of wind to come Wednesday. Humidity remains low and this combination will challenge firefighting efforts through at least Wednesday evening.”

The National Interagency Fire Center reported on Monday that another 15 new large wildfires broke out across the western US, bringing the total to 87 fires, which have burned more than 2.7 million acres. In places where there are no immediate fires in the vicinity, smoke and ash have darkened the daytime sky and affected people with respiratory problems.

The fires in California have already exceeded last year’s fire season which saw 5,000 fires burn 118,000 acres by September 2019. Already this year, the state recorded more than 7,600 fires which burned more than 2.3 million acres, according to Cal Fire.

Strong winds, droughts, and global warming have dried out vegetation and officials have urged residents to refrain from any activity that can spark a fire. Pacific Gas & Electric has shut off power to prevent downed power lines from triggering wildfires, affecting some 170,000 homes across much of Northern California. The loss of electricity has also prevented residents from pumping water and saving their homes.

The US Forest Service closed all campgrounds in all national forests in California citing “extreme fire behavior.”

The Creek Fire in the mountains of Madera and Fresno counties has destroyed at least 360 buildings since it began on Friday evening. The fire has been zero percent contained and has already burned 163,000 acres, an area the size of New York City’s Central Park, every 30 minutes for the last several days.

The Bobcat fire, in the San Gabriel Mountains east of Los Angeles, has burned some 11,400 acres, prompting an evacuation order for parts of Pasadena. In San Bernardino County, the El Dorado fire is 19 percent contained and has burned another 11,479 acres. Officials are concerned about more blazes, since the state has yet to reach the peak of its fire season, spurred on by strong Santa Ana winds.

Nationwide, the number of fires and acres destroyed in 2020 is below the 10-year average for the same period according to the National Interagency Fire Center. So far this year, 41,147 fires have been

reported, while the average number of fires reported by this point in September over the last 10 years was 43,915. The total number of acres burned in 2020 so far is already 4.7 million, compared with the 10-year average of 5.7 million acres by this time in the year.

Despite these numbers, experts are alarmed at the severity of the most recent fires along the west coast. Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, told the *Guardian*, “The geographic scale and intensity of what is transpiring is truly jarring.” Chris Field, the director of the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment, told the paper, “What’s remarkable is that there’s so many fires. Even as someone whose job is to understand what’s happening, it’s really hard to keep up.”

The fact that there are now record-breaking fire seasons every year is proof that capitalism has utterly failed in preventing or even containing these predictable and entirely preventable catastrophes. Given that global warming itself is man-made, such occurrences can no longer even be described solely as “natural disasters.”



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