Ten percent of Oregon's population ordered to evacuate as wildfires continue to ravage the US west coast

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Enormous wildfires are continuing to spread throughout California, Washington state and Oregon. Fourteen people have now died; a one-year-old boy in Washington, three people in Oregon, and ten in California. The death toll is expected to increase.

In Oregon, where Governor Kate Brown has warned that the state may experience its greatest ever loss of lives and property due to wildfires, more than 10 percent of the state's population, approximately 500,000 residents, have been placed under evacuation orders due to encroaching fires. Tens of thousands have also been forced to evacuate their homes across Washington and California as entire towns and neighborhoods have been burned to the ground..

In California alone, 64,000 people are under orders to evacuate from 29 wildfires raging at once across the state, burning more than 3 million acres. In just nine days, more acres have burned than in the state's average fire season. These are just the latest in a series of devastating fire seasons over the past three years. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) has reported that six of the top twenty largest wildfires in California history have occurred in 2020.

Butte County, north of Sacramento, has been hit especially hard with 247,000 acres burned and over 2,000 buildings and homes destroyed, of the total 3,900 structures destroyed in California. Cal Fire recently tweeted September 9 that "this year's fire season has already hit the record books, with more acres burning in 2020 than any other year in the past 3 decades (since statewide figures have been tracked)." In 2018, Butte County was the site of the Camp Fire, which burned down the town of Paradise, becoming the deadliest wildfire in state history.

As of Wednesday, a total of 587,000 acres in Washington have burned on both sides of the Cascade Mountains. Record high temperatures on Wednesday and Thursday have contributed to the spread of the fires by drying out vegetation.

Washington Governor Jay Inslee tweeted that he had not witnessed fires such as these "in his 33 years of service. Climate change is making these fires more frequent, more expensive and far more dangerous." Inslee will be visiting the town of Malden, southwest of Spokane, to view what little remains of it after 80 percent of the town was turned to ash and smoldering ruins by rapidly moving flames. One resident of Malden stated that "it looked like a bomb had gone off."

In Oregon, 900,000 acres have burned down. Governor Kate Brown noted the influence of climate change stating, "It is the bellwether of the future. We are feeling the acute impacts of climate change. We are seeing its acute impacts in Oregon, on the West Coast and frankly in the entire world," Brown said.

Smoke has rendered the air unfit to breathe across vast swathes of the west coast. Air in Salem, Oregon, for example, contained the highest pollution levels on the planet Thursday, according to the United States' Air Quality Index. Visibility in regions across Oregon, Washington, and California is low, or soon will be low, because of the smoke.

Of the 50 wildfires burning across Washington, Oregon and California, only two in Oregon have been contained. Thousands of firefighters are battling the wildfires, and hundreds of additional National Guardsmen have been called to assist the firefighters.

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The situation for those who must evacuate is extremely difficult. Frank Martinez, a resident of Oroville, California and survivor of the Bear fire—which has claimed ten lives so far—emphasized that the fire spread rapidly and cut off evacuation routes, causing traffic jams. Around 10 p.m. Wednesday "it was like all the sudden someone turned on a switch" and the wind became "crazy bad," he told the Associated Press. Martinez and other residents will not know if their property has been destroyed until after evacuation orders are lifted.

In Washington, Inslee is still deciding whether to seek federal assistance for the fire damages, insisting that federal assistance is often "less robust" for private losses, and often offers more help for public assets like utilities and libraries. There is no doubt that many adversely affected by the wildfires will be mired in financial difficulties and never made whole, with little to nothing done by the government to protect their homes from the next round of fires.

It is increasingly apparent that the growing frequency and intensity of wildfires throughout the region are much more "man-made" than natural disasters of the past. On the one hand, urban development has pushed further into wilderness, allowing wildfires to wreak havoc in an urban environment. In California, 4.5 million homes are located in the wilderness-urban interface and have a high risk of being engulfed in wildfires.

On the other hand, the role played by climate change would be difficult to overstate. The Fourth National Climate Assessment published in 2018 found that rising temperatures and droughts throughout the American Southwest were exacerbating wildfires. Worldwide, the disruption to normal climate patterns has resulted in more extreme fluctuations in weather.

Mike Flannigan, of the University of Alberta and the Director of the Western Partnership for Wildland Fire Science, stresses the fact that the rise in the frequency and intensity of wildfires is increasing internationally. He also draws attention to what scientist Stephen J. Pyne has repeatedly emphasized: we are now living in the "Age of the Pyrocene." The fires rampaging across California, Oregon and Washington are quickly becoming the "new normal" in the region.

Climate change poses an existential threat. Workers in the United States and around the world can, and must, organize against a ruling class that places profits above the value of human life.

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