Millions in the US choke on hazardous air as West Coast fires continue to rage

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As fires continue to rage across the West Coast of the United States, millions of people have suffered from the destruction of their homes, the deaths of loved ones and animals, mass evacuation, and the health risks posed by hazardous air quality. The 2020 fire season has quickly spiraled into a social and environmental catastrophe, far surpassing California's last historic Camp Fire in 2018.

Roughly 100 large fires, some of which have merged into massive complexes, have broken historical records as 3.4 million acres have burned in California, joined by over one million acres in Oregon and over 600,000 acres in Washington.

Experts can only describe the fires as "unprecedented" in their size, speed, and destruction. To give a sense of the nature of these flames, 900,000 acres burned in a single 72-hour period in Oregon alone.

Thirty-three confirmed deaths have been counted as of Sunday, including a one-year-old boy in Renton, Washington. Dozens were missing in Oregon over the weekend, with rescue crews working to identify them.

Further, tens of thousands of people have been evacuated, sometimes scrambling in a matter of minutes as flames quickly approach their neighborhoods. About 12 percent of the Oregon state population, or more than 500,000 people, were given varying degrees of evacuation alerts for the weekend.

"We didn't know what to grab. We didn't pack. Who knows what to do when you're going through this?" Nailah Garner told KOMO News regarding her husband's and her experience fleeing their home in a small forested town of Vida, Oregon. After the fires swept through the area and she returned to the apocalyptic scenes, Garner commented, "It's all gone, and it looks like a war zone hit it."

Many have sought refuge with family members or friends who lived in less risky areas, soon after being forced to pack up again and travel further as evacuation orders expanded. Others have traveled to evacuation sites that were hastily set up at churches, schools, fairgrounds, and event centers.

Given the heavy agricultural importance of many of the affected regions, families have had to find shelter not only for themselves but for their livestock as well. The Oregon State Fairgrounds is currently housing 500 animals and 1,500 families.

The National Interagency Fire Center reported on Sunday that over 30,000 firefighters and support personnel were deployed to fires across the US. While the majority of the fires are along the West Coast, firefighters are combatting blazes in Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming.

While 30,000 may seem like a large number, the firefighting teams are overwhelmed and understaffed for the complex task of managing the infernos. Angeles National Forest Fire Chief Robert Garcia told CNN on Saturday that his department is fighting the 32,000-acre Bobcat Fire with "500 personnel, when it usually has 1,000 to 1,500" and that "some firefighters are working more than 24 hours in a shift."

Adding to the risks posed to the lives and health of West Coast residents is the giant smoke plume that is currently resting on the densely populated western half of California, Oregon, and Washington. The smoke has created very hazardous air conditions which began last week and are expected to last for weeks in California.

Scientists use the Air Quality Index (AQI) to monitor air pollution throughout the world, measuring the parts of fine particulate matter within a cubic meter of air. The AQI measurements were created for a scale of 0 to 500, ranging from healthy air quality to dangerous air

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quality.

The entire West Coast has had AQI over 100, which is considered unhealthy for at-risk groups with lung conditions and asthma. Many cities have recorded far higher levels, surpassing 300 AQI that is “unhealthy for all groups.” Air quality index measurements between 500 and 820 were recorded in Southern and Central Oregon, the northeastern outskirts of the San Francisco Bay Area, and the Central Valley in California.

Portland, Oregon has been placed under a State of Emergency due to the combination of hazardous air quality as well as the threat of fires creeping towards its suburbs. On Sunday morning, Portland’s air quality index value averaged about 516, becoming the number one major city with the worst air quality in the world. The recent events strike parallels with modern records of 755 AQI in Beijing, China in 2011 and over 1,200 in New Delhi, India last November, where urban pollution reached obscene heights.

The number of tiny particles of hazardous smoke entering residents’ lungs and bloodstreams can cause serious health consequences, straining their respiratory and cardiovascular systems. This can cause irritated throats, burning eye sensations, compromised immunity, asthma attacks, bronchitis, lung failure, heart attacks, cardiac arrest, and other severe conditions.

These health risks have caused an uptick in immediate hospitalizations, while also making the population more susceptible to the COVID-19 virus, the symptoms of which become more severe for those with compromised respiratory and immune systems.

“There’s that aspect that people who are sick with COVID, but maybe not sick enough to notice or go to the hospital. But then when you add smoke on top of it, it could kick them into an extra-bad respiratory response,” Jeffrey Pierce, an atmospheric scientist at Colorado State University, explained to Oregon Public Broadcasting.

These hazardous conditions have affected well over 20 million people, taking into account the most populous metro areas in the region: Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle.

The combination of little to no preparation by the ruling class for disasters and the extreme weather conditions fueled by climate change has made it possible for these annual fires to become such devastating experiences for millions.

As with all natural disasters, the brunt of the damage will fall to the working class and the most vulnerable in society. Thousands of “essential” workers are forced to labor in toxic air and become more susceptible to the coronavirus, the elderly and those with chronic health conditions confront life-threatening conditions from the smoke, the homeless are not sheltered in the countless empty housing units that could be utilized, and many of those who have lost their homes will be left with nothing.

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