Record wildfires continue to rage across US West Coast

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The wildfires sweeping across the US West Coast have so far burned nearly 8,000 square miles—more than the land area of New Jersey—displaced tens of thousands, and cast a thick screen of smoke across the western states. At least 35 people have died in the three coastal states, and hundreds of homes and entire neighborhoods have been burned to the ground.

California has seen five of the ten largest wildfires in its history this season, including the August Complex—now the largest fire in state history—and the LNU, SZU, and CZU Lightning Complexes, which are burning on all sides of the San Francisco Bay.

Twenty other major fires are still burning throughout the state. As of September 14, 7,718 wildfires have burned more than 3.45 million acres in California. This accounts for more than 3 percent of the state's roughly 100 million acres of land.

The town of Malden in Washington state was virtually destroyed last week as wildfires burned 80 percent of the buildings in a city of 200 people. Washington governor Jay Inslee, a Democrat, later took a trip to Malden where he offered no immediate help to town residents aside from boxes of apples picked from the grounds of the governor's mansion. The apples were later found to have maggots inside.

In Oregon, four massive fires are burning near Portland, Salem, and Eugene, the state's three most populous cities, and officials warned last week that they were "preparing for a mass fatality event." Some 40,000 people have been evacuated, and 22 people were still missing in the state as of Tuesday. Until Sunday, the entire city of Portland was on alert for a mass evacuation.

Five towns in Oregon have been "substantially destroyed," and thousands of structures have been leveled across the state. On Monday, 70 people in Detroit, Oregon were forced to evacuate along dirt roads used by the US Forest Service, and on Tuesday, fire debris blocked roads and trapped dozens of people trying to evacuate near Eugene, Oregon.

A wall of smoke continues to enshroud the entire West Coast, with tens of millions from Seattle to San Diego exposed to hazardous air for successive days. Portland's air quality has been the worst in the world since Sunday, and Los Angeles is suffering its worst smog in 26 years.

Thousands of people living in temporary shelters and parking lots across the three states are being forced to contend with the dual disasters of the wildfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, which threatens to spread through shelters and evacuation sites.

The official "COVID-19 Interim Shelter Guidance" from the office of Oregon Governor Kate Brown admits these dangers. The document warns: "All shelter residents, even those without symptoms, may have been exposed to COVID-19 and should self-quarantine after leaving the shelter in accordance with state and local recommendations." Smoke inhalation threatens to make millions more susceptible to the virus and inundate hospitals with patients suffering from respiratory symptoms.

The wildfires have also severely disrupted public education. In California, more than 70,000 students have been impacted by halts to remote education, as students and teachers have had to evacuate. *CalMatters* reports that over 8,000 California students and educators have lost their homes to wildfires since 2015.

"The kids are confused because we spent three days online doing our Zoom meetings, and now that's gone away," kindergarten teacher Kristie Summerrill told *CalMatters*. "Now, they're staying at friends' houses or hotels. They're not understanding why there is no

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school right now."

While 2020 is already a record year for wildfires, the offshore wind season—the period in autumn when the West Coast's most destructive fires tend to take place—is just beginning, and the fire season could last into December.

According to the US Forest Service, "what was once a four-month fire season now lasts six to eight months" in some parts of the country. The length of the fire season has increased by about 75 days in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, according to Cal Fire.

Even after the fires end, the return of wetter conditions in the winter will heighten the danger of post-fire flooding and mudslides. According to the National Weather Service, following wildfires, "locations downhill and downstream from burned areas are very susceptible to flash flooding and debris flows, especially near steep terrain."

In January 2018, heavy rain on hillsides burned by the Thomas Fire caused rapid erosion and powerful mudslides resulting in catastrophic damage in the town of Montecito, California, killing 23 people and destroying 130 homes. The burn scars created by the 2020 fire season, which now span millions of acres, will remain vulnerable to erosion for years and will pose an ongoing threat to countless communities.

A recent study by researchers at Arizona State University and the University of California, Los Angeles found that climate change is increasing the risk of debris flow from wildfires throughout California.

In addition to hazardous air, West Coast residents may soon have to contend with toxic chemicals released by burnt electronics, cars, plastics, and industrial equipment, which can be carried into rivers and waterways by rain.

Earlier this month, officials in Santa Cruz County announced that the CZU Lightning complex had melted seven miles of plastic pipeline, leeching the carcinogenic chemical benzene into the water supply. Benzene was previously found in the water supply in Santa Rosa, California following the Tubbs Fire in 2017, and in the town of Paradise, California, after that town was largely destroyed by the Camp Fire in 2018.

This year's unprecedented fire season has undoubtedly been fueled by climate change, which has brought about hotter and dryer conditions. A five-year drought from 2011 to 2016, the driest in California's history, killed and desiccated over 100 million trees.

Across the West Coast, fires are moving faster and growing larger. Doug Grafe, chief of Fire Protection at the Oregon Department of Forestry, told reporters that the extent and speed of the wildfires in Oregon was unprecedented. "Seeing them run down the canyons the way they have—carrying tens of miles in one period of an afternoon and not slowing down in the evening—[there is] absolutely no context for that in this environment."

In the last twenty years, Oregon has experienced eleven megafires, as compared to six megafires in the entire twentieth century, according to Jim Gersbach from the Oregon Department of Forestry. Until this year, no more than two megafires had been observed in the state in a single year. There are now four megafires burning at once. Professor Michael Gollner, who leads the Berkeley Fire Research Lab, wrote that "we've never seen fires of this magnitude," and called the behavior of the fires "unreal."

The devastation caused by the 2020 fire season, like the COVID-19 pandemic, is a direct consequence of the criminal policies pursued by the ruling class. Like the pandemic, the threat of wildfires was entirely foreseeable, yet Republican and Democratic administrations alike have cut federal funding for fire science for decades.

The Trump Administration has pushed through $2 billion in cuts from the US Forest Service budget, while threatening to cut off federal aid for California wildfires. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party, which politically dominates California, Oregon, and Washington, has refused for decades to take any substantial action to mitigate the danger of wildfires, and has systematically defunded social infrastructure and cut firefighter staffing.

Vast social resources exist to stop the unfolding environmental catastrophe and protect human life, but this can only be achieved by mobilizing the working class to reorganize economic and political life to satisfy social need rather than private profit.

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