PG&E shuts off power to tens of thousands as West Coast wildfires continue to rage

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As wildfires continue along the West Coast of the US, Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) shut off power to nearly 100,000 customers in the midst of record-breaking heat. The company shut down power on Sunday morning to prevent its equipment from sparking wildfires in California.

Across the state, firefighters continue to battle 26 major wildfires, some of which have been going for over a month. More than 3.6 million acres have burned and 26 people have died in California alone and some six counties still face evacuation orders.

The power shutoff will affect around 96,976 customers in San Francisco Bay Area counties. Altogether some 300,000 people will be affected by the shutoffs according to Census data.

The threat to forestland still continues as at least half of National Forests in the state will remain closed. The Forest Service announced that all 18 of California's National Forests have stayed closed as of September 9 because of high-risk fire conditions.

The National Weather Service warned that high winds could combine with a heat wave and "critically dry conditions" that could lead to rapid fire spread this week. Red flag warnings have been raised from the Bay Area all the way to the Oregon border.

Meanwhile, the Glass Fire in Napa County has prompted mandatory evacuations as blazes grew to more than 1,200 acres overnight. Cal Fire issued orders for residents in St. Helena and other parts of the county to leave after the fire began on Sunday, saying it was burning at a "dangerous rate of spread."

An evacuation center was established in Napa and evacuees were asked to bring face masks and practice social distancing to limit the spread of COVID-19. A large animal shelter was also designated at the Napa Valley Horsemen's Association.

Firefighting response teams from the surrounding area were sent to help put out the Napa blaze, including elements of the San Francisco Fire Department. The fires grew so severe that the St. Helena hospital, Adventist Health, had to be evacuated and a statement was announced on

Sunday morning that it was temporarily suspending emergency and hospital care and transferring all patients.

A St. Helena resident, Pat McGivern, told ABC7 News that the fires were just miles from her house and were "frightening." She was warned by her neighbor and planned to evacuate soon. She told the news channel that she could hear several propane tanks exploding and multiple homes in the area burning.

As of publication, Cal Fire has been unable to determine the source of the fire.

The economic impact of the ongoing fire season will be severe. The top 10 costliest fires in recent US history have all been in California. The costliest single wildfire was the 2018 Camp Fire, which amounted to more than $8.5 billion in losses according to the Insurance Information Institute.

However, the cost for all fires in 2018 was over $20 billion. According to Reinsurer Munich Re the costs from this year's fires will be a similar number. The travel industry in the state has been especially hit hard this year. First by COVID-19, and now the fires which have spread smoke and ash over popular tourist destinations. Higher insurance premiums will also affect economic recovery after the fires are gone.

Yet despite the intensity of this year's fires, they have yet to surpass 2015 as the worst year for wildfires in the US, according to the National Interagency Coordination Center. That year saw 68,000 fires destroy over 10 million acres across the country. Second place was

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taken by 2017. The general trend is toward more fires every year as human-induced climate change takes its toll on the environment and capitalism prevents any lasting solution.

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