

# Major wildfires force tens of thousands to evacuate in Northern California

Peter Ross  
1 October 2020

As of Tuesday, the Zogg Fire has burned over 50,000 acres, killed 3 people, and destroyed at least 146 buildings since it began Sunday in Shasta County, near the city of Redding. Strong winds and ongoing dry, hot weather caused the fire to almost double in size on Monday, which was 0 percent contained as of Tuesday. About 700 firefighters have been deployed to the fire since Monday, many of whom are battling exhaustion after months of grueling shifts combating fires across the state. More than 1,200 residents of nearby areas have so far been evacuated, and more than 1,500 structures were at risk as of Tuesday.

A second large fire, the Glass Fire, began Sunday morning in Napa Valley and spread rapidly through California's Sonoma and Napa counties. Satellite images show the fire spreading Sunday night at a rate of about 1 acre every 5 seconds, and nearly quadrupling in size between Monday and Tuesday. The only hospital in the town of St. Helena was forced to evacuate its patients and staff Sunday morning, shortly after the fire broke out. This was the second time the hospital was forced to evacuate in five weeks, after the LNU Lightning Complex fire came within 8 miles of the hospital in August.

As of Wednesday morning, the fire had burned almost 50,000 acres and destroyed at least 80 homes in Napa County and Sonoma County, with at least one neighborhood reportedly "completely wiped out." Over 80,000 people have been forced to evacuate, including thousands in Santa Rosa, who fled in hasty night-time evacuations as the fire spread into the Skyhawk neighborhood in the eastern part of the city. More than 20,000 structures remained threatened as of Wednesday, according to Cal Fire—California's fire agency—and tens of thousands have been affected by power outages.

The Shady Fire, an offshoot likely sparked by windblown embers from the Glass Fire, began Sunday night and rapidly approached the senior living community

of Oakmont, near the town of Kenwood, surrounding the community on three sides and forcing its 4,700 residents, many of whom do not own cars, to evacuate. Residents of the Oakmont Gardens assisted care facility, many with walkers or in wheelchairs, had to wait until midnight—a delay of several hours—to be evacuated on crowded buses. The fire crossed Highway 12—the main evacuation route, which was packed with traffic—less than two hours later. Embers from the nearby fires reportedly hit the windshields of the evacuating buses, and sparked fires in a number of houses in Oakmont. The elderly evacuees were taken to the Santa Rosa Veterans Auditorium, only to be moved again around 3 AM to the town of Petaluma.

Oakmont residents Doris and Armin Tietze told *San Francisco Chronicle* reporters that this was the third time a wildfire had forced them to evacuate their home. "It was scary, and I didn't expect it to be so close," said Doris, 91. The German couple said it reminded them of surviving World War II.

State officials have procured only 1,500 rooms at 143 hotels to house the evacuees. The vast majority of the tens of thousands of people who are now refugees have been sent to the Sonoma-Marin Fairgrounds, the Petaluma Veteran's Building, and an RV and tent campground at the Sonoma Raceway. There, with little or no aid, they will face triple digit temperatures from yet another round of heat waves and the constant threat of infection with the coronavirus, which has infected over 800,000 people statewide. The Sonoma County Fairgrounds has housed wildfire evacuees, mostly from the LNU Lightning Complex, since August.

The devastation in Napa and Sonoma Counties comes only three years after prior fires burned over 250,000 acres in northern California in 2017, causing over \$14.5 billion in damages. The most devastating of these, the Tubbs Fire, destroyed over 5,600 homes, including thousands of homes in the north and east of Santa Rosa,

and killed 22 people. The Tubbs Fire was surpassed only a year later as the most destructive fire in state history by the Camp Fire, which destroyed the entire town of Paradise, near Chico, killing 85 people. These events demonstrated not only the increased scale and ferocity of the fires brought about by climate change, but the total inadequacy of existing evacuation measures.

During the Camp Fire, Paradise's 27,000 residents were forced to flee along a single road and found themselves caught in gridlock traffic. Some residents abandoned their cars and fled on foot, while others were burned alive in their vehicles.

Calls made to Sonoma County residents during the 2017 fires there reached fewer than 1 in 30 of those affected by the fires. In 2019, a lawsuit filed against the Oakmont Senior Living company, which was destroyed by the Tubbs Fire, alleged that "prior to the Tubbs Fire, [Oakmont Senior Living] failed to establish a written disaster and mass casualty plan of action and viable evacuation plan," which very nearly resulted in a massive loss of life after residents were abandoned in the facility.

Three years later, little has been learned. The town of Paradise was once again placed under an evacuation warning as the North Complex Fire burned nearby Sunday night. Like in Paradise, Oakmont's elderly population must evacuate wildfires, which are spreading more quickly than ever before, along a single route of egress.

So far this year, more than 8,000 square miles have been burned by wildfires across the West Coast, placing about 3 million of California's 12 million homes at high risk, according to Cal Fire. There are currently 27 major fire complexes raging across California, and five of the six largest fires in state history have started since August. The North Complex in the Sierra Nevada foothills, and the LNU and SCU Lightning Complexes, which have collectively burned over 700,000 acres near the San Francisco Bay, are now largely contained. However, the Creek Fire, which has burned over 300,000 acres northeast of Fresno, and the August Complex Fire, which at roughly 950,000 acres is more than twice as large as any other fire in California history, are still less than 40 percent contained.

Extremely hot and dry conditions brought about by climate change—the drought which affected California from 2011 to 2019 is estimated to have killed some 147 million trees and produced huge areas of desiccated vegetation—are causing fires to grow more quickly and spread across larger tracts of land than ever before.

According to the Congressional Research Service, the average yearly acreage burned nationwide every year since 2000 is more than double the average burned during the 1990s. Over the same period, the federal government has cut the budget for vegetation management, from \$240 in 2001 to \$180 million in 2015. The Trump Administration has continued this trend, with \$2 billion in cuts from the US Forest Service budget.

The Democratic administration of Governor Gavin Newsom has declared a state of emergency in Shasta, Napa, and Sonoma counties, and has publicly declared that fire management will be a focus in the state budget. Yet it was only three months ago that the Newsom administration passed a \$54 billion budget cut targeting health and social services, which included a 10 percent pay cut for state workers, including firefighters. Even before the pandemic, Newsom proposed to hire a grand total of 438 new firefighters over the next five years. By way of comparison, there were over 18,700 firefighters battling wildfires in the state as of Tuesday. Nor has Newsom addressed the use of thousands of inmate firefighters, who are paid about one dollar per hour and typically comprise 30 to 40 percent of the state's firefighting personnel.

From March to June, the five richest billionaires in California made \$70 billion, enough to pay the state's average wildfire budget more than a hundred times over. To these layers, the destruction of homes and entire businesses by wildfires is no more than an operating expense.

Newsom's own Plumpjack Winery, which he co-owns with Gordon Getty—multibillionaire heir to the Getty oil fortune—is now threatened by both the Glass Fire and the LNU Complex Fire. Working people, bearing the brunt of the disaster, face much different problems. For the thousands of workers laboring in toxic air, the elderly waiting in dangerously crowded shelters, and the countless families with damaged or destroyed homes, the need to reorganize society's resources to satisfy social need, not private profit, is a matter of life or death.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**