

“It was a slice of heaven... That was my sanctuary.”

Evacuees describe devastation as California fires rage

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In a record-setting year of heatwaves and wildfires it appears as if there is no end in sight, with California experiencing another week of extreme heat and arid conditions, setting the stage for another round of blazes. Although firefighters were able to make some progress on the fires last week, the current heatwave is set to continue until the end of the weekend, bringing little, if any, relief.

The Weather Channel reports that as temperatures begin to drop for eastern states, West Coast conditions overall will remain “very likely above average,” confirming that the fires will persist well into November. This comes as a sobering reality check, considering California’s—and the rest of the West Coast’s—wildfire season is just beginning. And yet, perhaps it should come as little surprise, after the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reported recently that the Northern Hemisphere recorded its hottest summer yet.

So far this year, over 8,100 fires have erupted throughout California, scorching close to 4 million acres. Five of the six largest fires in state history have occurred this year alone.

Adding to these fires are the recent additions of the Glass and Zogg fires, both of which ignited this past Sunday and have burned well over 100,000 acres collectively, tearing through Napa, Sonoma and Shasta counties. Over 200 homes and other structures have been destroyed, and at least four people have been killed. The fires ripped through a number of local wineries, burning through vineyards and structures. Containment levels for both fires are at 5 percent and 26 percent, respectively. The Sonoma and Napa valleys are world-famous for their wineries, with nearly 800

operations bringing in millions of dollars in tourism every year.

As of Wednesday morning, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom announced that the Zogg fire was threatening to merge with the August Fire. If combined, the two fires would cover more than 1 million acres.

Yet another blaze, the Martindale fire, broke out on Monday in the Santa Clarita Valley, just 40 minutes north of Los Angeles. Although considerably smaller than the former two, it burned 200 acres in its first 30 minutes and evacuation orders were issued to nearby residents. As of Thursday morning, it was holding at 300 acres and was 40 percent contained.

Emphasizing the fact that there are still many weeks left in the fire season, Cal Fire unit chief in Sonoma and Napa counties, Shana Jones, told the *New York Times* that “We still have a lot of this season to go.” Numerous new fires are expected between now and the end of the year, which will no doubt call for a number of new evacuation orders and will leave hundreds of thousands of people vulnerable to the very stark reality that they, too, could lose their homes.

As it is, evacuation centers have struggled in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic with the overwhelming number of evacuees pouring in from the Glass and Zogg fires.

In the early hours of Monday morning, elderly residents of the Oakmont Village retirement community arrived at Santa Rosa Veteran Auditorium, set up as a temporary shelter. Pictures and video surfaced on Twitter displaying the crowd of elderly evacuees sitting on the lawn waiting to be escorted inside. However, the auditorium quickly filled to capacity and, shortly after 3 a.m., they were moved to a

shelter in Petaluma, about 20 minutes south of Santa Rosa.

Scenes like this will replay throughout the remainder of the fire season. So far, close to 80,000 residents have had to flee their homes. Many people will never be able to return, having lost their homes and all earthly possessions.

Roxanne Alvarez told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she was returning home to Santa Rosa Sunday evening with her family when she began receiving texts from friends and neighbors, inquiring if she had evacuated. She was relieved that she returned home in time, as her 21-year-old niece, who was distance learning from home due to the coronavirus, had stayed behind from the trip.

Alvarez, who had an open, wide mountain view, quickly saw the glow of the Shady fire from the other side of the hills and realized it would come running towards her home in no time. She, her family, along with her two dogs and cats evacuated immediately. Although they made it to safety, she and her mother both lost their homes. They are currently staying in local hotels.

So far, her insurance company has wired Alvarez a mere \$2,500 and she won't be able to receive further compensation for her home or other costs incurred until an adjuster can survey the damage on her property. Until then, her insurance agency has told her to "hold on" to her receipts for reimbursement at a later time, assuming that she and other families are able to bear the costs out of pocket. They have had to rely on a GoFundMe page that was set up for her and her family. Alvarez states that the costs of staying in hotels are adding up fast, saying, "We've been using our credit cards a lot, but we can't keep living off of them. We need money now."

Finding a place to stay also proved to be challenging. Alvarez, who bought her home just three and a half years ago, has had difficulty finding an apartment, many of which are expensive or will not accept her two dogs. She investigated staying at an Airbnb, which was offering free lodging, but currently has nothing available. And because she has homeowners insurance, she does not qualify for FEMA's emergency housing.

When asked if she was concerned about how long it would take to receive compensation to replace her home, Alvarez insisted that she will have to fight, "I'm

pretty hard when it comes to something like this. I won't accept 'I don't have time.'"

Year after year has seen the fires encroach ever closer to Alvarez's home. This time around, unfortunately, her and her mother's homes, located on the same property, did not make it through the fire season. "It was a slice of heaven," Alvarez said, adding, "I am out. That was my sanctuary."

A report by the World Economic Forum found that extreme weather events like wildfires are displacing 20 million people a year, a size equivalent to the city of Beijing, China.

The damage from the wildfires has been so colossal over the past few years that the state of California actually banned insurance companies from canceling nearly 800,000 policies last year. Many insurers have pulled out of the state to avoid further losses, leaving millions without homes and no recourse towards being made whole.

Earlier this year, Governor Newsom initially proposed a \$12 billion "climate budget" that would, in part, allocate funding for the prevention and response to California's wildfire crisis and focus on providing clean air and water to economically disadvantaged communities. Those plans were mostly scrapped in May, officially to balance the gaping \$54.3 billion deficit left by the economic collapse triggered by the coronavirus pandemic. Only the opposite has been achieved as the state and entire West Coast breaks records for the worst air pollution in the entire world.



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