

The California wildfires: A disaster of capitalism and climate change

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On Monday, California wildfire activity set a double record; first, it was announced that the August Complex Fire in Coastal California had extended to one million acres; second, the total extent of all California fires this season exceeded 4 million acres.

In all, the 42,000 wildfires in the western United States have consumed 6.7 million acres, most of which is in California and Arizona. The 2020 fire season will extend at least until the end of November.

The National Interagency Fire Center warned on August 14 of an “above normal significant fire potential” in 2020 for the US, due to delayed rain in the Southwest, the Pacific Northwest and Canada. Within days of this warning, a wave of thunderstorms ignited the massive August Complex and SCU Lightning Complex fires on August 16, and the LNU Lightning Complex on August 17, which developed into some of the largest fires in California history.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported this week that the record August Complex—an amalgam of 38 separate fires—is burning in 7 counties in the northwestern part of California, an area home to more than 400,000 people.

The *Guardian* quoted California Department of Forestry (Cal Fire) spokesperson Scott McLean: “The 4m [million acre] mark is unfathomable. It boggles the mind and takes your breath away.” McLean also pointed out that this figure will grow and that the August Complex, for instance, is less than 60 percent contained. According to California Governor Gavin Newsom, the August Complex alone is larger than all of the recorded fires in California between 1932 and 1999.

The current wave of fires has moved toward heavily populated areas along the Pacific Coast, north of the San Francisco Bay and east of Los Angeles, forcing hundreds of thousands to evacuate.

Three weather events have come together this fire season: wind gusts, record heat and extremely dry conditions, which have caused fires to grow more quickly and spread across larger tracts of land than ever before.

In California, the land area burned annually by wildfires is now about eight times greater than in the 1970s. The 4 million acres burned in the state this year are now more than double the previous record of 1.9 million, set in 2018.

A 2006 paper from the University of California Merced, published in *Science*, found that “the broad-scale increase in wildfire frequency across the western US has been driven primarily by sensitivity of fire regimes to recent changes in climate over a relatively large area.”

A 2016 paper by researchers at the University of Idaho found that the majority of the annual variations in burned area is due to “fuel aridity,” caused by higher temperatures and a decline in summertime humidity, and that “human-caused climate change caused over half of the documented increases in fuel aridity since the 1970s and doubled the cumulative forest fire area since 1984.”

The catastrophic fires sweeping the western United States are only the latest example of the extreme weather events being brought about by human-induced climate change.

The record-breaking 2019–2020 bushfires in Australia burned some 46 million acres, destroyed 5,600 buildings and killed 34 people. Over 500 million mammals, birds, and reptiles are thought to have died in those fires, with some endangered species likely pushed into extinction. In August, the New South Wales government published the results of an inquiry into the fires which characterized the 2019–2020 fire season as “extremely unusual,” but warned that “it is clear that we should expect fire seasons like 2019–20, or potentially worse, to happen again.”

Across the world, wildfires are currently raging in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in sub-Saharan Africa, in Borneo in Indonesia, in the southern Pantanal wetlands and in the Amazon River basin in Brazil, and in Argentina’s grasslands. “It’s the end of winter, and it’s been a really, really dry winter,” reported University of Colorado research scientist Virginia Iglesias to the *New York Times*. “These exceptionally dry conditions in central Argentina, and in many other areas of the country create conditions that are perfect for fires once you have fuel.”

Historically high temperatures this year, combined with reduced snow accumulation, have caused wildfires across Russian Siberia, emitting large amounts of carbon dioxide — as much as Norway emits annually — according to a recent *New York Times* report. Also released by the global wildfires are clouds of carbon monoxide and aerosol particles harmful to

human health.

A paper published in January in *Science Advances* found that changes to normal climate variability have likely contributed to the severe fires in arctic regions. These “zombie fires,” which can smolder beneath the ice and snow in the winter before reemerging as temperatures rise, are themselves shaping conditions in these regions, and releasing immense amounts of greenhouse gases from the permafrost.

Like the California fires, those elsewhere are also spreading clouds of smoke that are endangering public health.

In August and September, the Air Quality Index for the state capital of Sacramento and surrounding cities showed markedly “unhealthy” regions. Smoke alerts were issued and citizens were advised to refrain from outdoor activities because of the Camp Fire.

Eric Guerra of the Sac Metro Air Quality Management board warned “children and the elderly to stay indoors and also anybody with prior respiratory issues.” Guerra indicated that masks used for the COVID-19 virus are not sufficient protection against the small airborne particles emanating from the fires.

A 2018 study in the *Journal of the American Heart Association* investigating the 2015 fire season found that wildfire smoke exposure was associated with increased rates of emergency department visits for numerous cardiovascular disease outcomes, including ischemic heart disease, dysrhythmia, heart failure, pulmonary embolism and stroke, especially among those older than 65.

Despite the growing danger of fires, the US federal government’s spending on vegetation management decreased under Republican and Democratic administrations from \$240 million in 2001 to \$180 million in 2015.

In a 2017 speech, US Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue described the inadequate funding for the US Forest Service’s fire management efforts: “We end up having to hoard all of the money that is intended for fire prevention, because we’re afraid we’re going to need it to actually fight fires. It means we can’t do the prescribed burning, harvesting, or insect control to prevent leaving a fuel load in the forest for future fires to feed on.”

Since then, the Trump Administration has repeatedly cut federal funding for wildfire prevention. Trump’s 2020 budget proposed cutting \$948 million from the National Forest Service, and the federal wildfire suppression fund has been cut by almost \$600 million since 2019. The Joint Fire Science Program, which funds fire science research, has been systematically cut since the early 2000s, and the Trump Administration has cut its budget by more than half since 2017, with the aim of entirely eliminating the fund.

The Democratic Party, which politically dominates California, Oregon and Washington, has likewise refused to provide sufficient funding for wildfire prevention and mitigation at the state level, and has allowed housing

development to increasingly expand into high-risk areas. A 2019 report by the McClatchy Company found that more than 2.7 million Californians live in areas highly vulnerable to wildfires.

The West Coast wildfires are only the latest example of the disastrous implications of climate change, which is making living conditions for the most vulnerable layers of society increasingly unbearable.

A September 2019 report by the UN Food and Agricultural Organization estimated that 821 million people are at risk of starvation as global warming makes agriculture increasingly untenable and that 3.2 billion people reside in areas that will become unlivable as soon as the next decade.

A September 2020 congressional report, “The Urgent Need for Climate Action,” estimated that, in California, “approximately 555,000 premature deaths would be avoided in the state over the next 50 years if warming is kept below 2 degrees [Celsius].” The report also found that limiting warming would “avoid approximately 400,000 emergency room visits and hospitalizations for cardiovascular and respiratory disease,” which would otherwise cost the state some \$4.5 trillion.

A 2016 report released by the United Nations Development Program found that a “business-as-usual” approach to climate change that allowed global temperatures to rise by 2.5 degrees Celsius would cost the global economy \$33 trillion per year by 2050, which is almost certainly a conservative estimate.

Yet, outside of cosmetic non-binding agreements, there have been no attempts to address this immense environmental crisis. The response of capitalist governments around the world to the threat of climate change demonstrates the indifference of the ruling elite to a crisis which threatens countless millions.

A July report by the International Energy Agency estimated that switching to entirely low-carbon sources of energy would cost the world around \$44 trillion between now and 2050, but that this amount would more than be made up for in reduced energy expenses. By way of comparison, a recent paper produced by the RAND Corporation think tank estimated that some \$47 trillion in income was lost by the bottom 90% of the American population between 1975 and 2018 as a result of rising inequality. In other words, the extra wealth siphoned from US workers to the American ruling class over the last 45 years would be sufficient for the world to make the transition to clean energy. Instead, this vast social wealth has been used to line the pockets of the country’s 600 or so billionaires.



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