

# Record-breaking Colorado wildfires prompt mass evacuations

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Since the 2020 fire season began in late summer, wildfires have scorched through thousands of acres across Colorado. As of Tuesday, nine different fires currently blazing in various areas of the state, with many blazes near population centers, have resulted in emergency evacuations of thousands of residents. Scores of homes have been destroyed by the relentless fires, with many more under threat.

Conditions of extreme aridity due to high temperatures which has caused the drying of trees and foliage, combined with high force winds, have intensified the destructive effect of the wildfires.

Firefighting aircraft have dropped tons of flame retardant on the fires raging around the state but have so far done little to halt the ferocious wildfires.

Smoke from the several fires around the state were visible for miles in all directions, causing a thick smog to hang over nearby towns, prompting authorities to issue an air quality advisory throughout the state.

In Larimer County near Fort Collins, the Cameron Peak fire, which ignited on August 13, has blazed through more than 200,000 acres, making it the largest wildfire in Colorado history. Significantly, the Cameron Peak fire is the second record-breaking blaze set in the state *just this year*, following the record held by the Pine Gulch fire, which ignited just weeks previously on July 31 near the city of Grand Junction. The Pine Gulch fire scorched over 139,000 acres. It is now reported to be fully contained.

Underlining the unprecedented nature of the wildfires ravaging the Western United States in 2020, just over the weekend, four new wildfires broke out across the state, including the CalWood fire near Boulder, a city with a population of 106,000.

The CalWood fire ignited on Saturday and is currently blazing simultaneously with a separate fire in

Lefthand Canyon near the town of Ward, which erupted on Sunday, burning 300 acres in just a few hours. The two fires combined have scorched thousands of acres.

Speaking to the extraordinary ferocity of the Cameron Peak fire, climate scientist Dr. Daniel Swain, a researcher with the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA, on Sunday tweeted his shock at the wildfire's unusual behavior: "Even as a scientist studying extreme weather & wildfire in a warming climate, I was shocked by how fast #CalWoodFire roared down the Colorado Front Range foothills this afternoon."

The CalWood blaze destroyed at least 26 homes near Jamestown, roughly 15 miles from Boulder. The fast-moving fire, exacerbated by high winds and rough, rocky terrain, is severely taxing the ability of firefighters to contain it. According to news reports, 250 firefighters are in the field working to extinguish the fire.

Some 1600 residences and 3000 people have been ordered to evacuate, and with the fire currently raging with no end in sight, authorities anticipate more emergency expulsions.

On Sunday, Boulder County Sheriff's Office Chief Mike Wagner told the media that it remains unclear the number of homes burned, stating that it is likely that the number is higher than officially reported. Chief Wagner called the CalWood fire "the biggest wildfire in Boulder County history."

Elsewhere around the state, another half-dozen fires continued to rage, with varying degrees of containment, burning thousands of acres.

On Monday, rescue helicopters were deployed to airlift 23 hikers to safety from a recreation area in the San Juan Mountains in southeastern Colorado, as the devastating Ice Fire, which began burning in the South

Mineral Creek area near a trail head popular with backpackers, scorched more than 300 acres in a few hours.

Illustrating the extreme danger the backpackers found themselves in, hiker Greg Anson told the *Durango Herald* newspaper that he was on a day trip to Ice Lake when he noticed a massive plume of smoke. He joined with other hikers to determine whether to leave the area or to wait for help. Reflecting on the group's dire straits, before four helicopters lifted them to safety amid flames closing in on the group, Anson said, "Some people didn't think they could make it. It was crazy. I've never been through anything like that."

It is clear that climate change is a significant factor in magnifying the devastating effects of seasonal wildfires, which have burned a record-setting combined total of 8.3 million acres in the Western United States so far in 2020.

Illustrating clearly the disaster facing millions of acres of wild lands by fires, Jeff Berardelli, a meteorologist and climate specialist reporter for CBS News, wrote in an article dated October 20, "This year Mother Nature has supplied us with smoking-gun evidence to prove what climate scientists have been warning about for decades. The scorched-earth impacts of climate change have arrived."

In his article, Berardelli cited Jennifer Balch, professor of fire ecology and director of Earth Lab at the University of Colorado Boulder, who stated, "Our 2020 wildfire season is showing us that climate change is here and now in Colorado. Warming is setting the stage for a lot of burning across an extended fire season."

According to Balch, in the 2010s Colorado saw a tripling of average burn areas in the month of October compared to the prior three decades.

"We do see fall fire events in Colorado, related to fast, downslope winds. But to see multiple events start this late, in the middle of October, is very, very rare," Balch explained.

Making an ominous description of the process of climate change fueling wildfires in the state, Brad Udall, water and climate research scientist at the Colorado Water Institute at Colorado State University, told CBS News that, "climate change, due to the burning of fossil fuels and the buildup of a heat-trapping carbon pollution blanket overhead, is

systematically drying out the landscape."



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