

2021 fire season in California: a new disaster

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The current California brush and wildfire season is off to an early start and threatens to surpass last year's record-setting wildfire season. In 2020, more than 4.3 million acres of vegetation burned, and more than 10,000 homes and buildings were destroyed.

Meteorological reports indicate that year-round wildfires have become common across the state and in the Pacific Northwest. A May 2021 article in the *San Jose Mercury News* confirmed that the California fire season now lasts 12 months.

Ominously, Red Flag fire danger warnings were issued in early May, nearly two months before the traditional start of the state's fire season. The Red Flag warnings issued May 4 included the region on both sides of California's Central Valley, a large area from Redding in the North to Modesto, east of the San Francisco Bay Area. The area includes Sacramento, the state capital.

As of this writing, there are eight active fires, including the Willow Fire (2,877 acres burned, 26 percent contained), the Mohave Fire (2,490 acres burned, 95 percent contained), the Cow Fire (761 acres burned, 85 percent contained), the Inyo Creek Fire (586 acres burned, 30 percent contained), the Overland Fire, near the Mexican border (515 acres burned, 95 percent contained) and the Mesa Fire, north of San Diego (350 acres burned, 40 percent contained).

The largest of those fires, the Willow Fire in Los Padres National Forest, has an estimated containment date of July 11, due to the very difficult terrain that fire crews have to confront.

The blaze has threatened homes and businesses, leading the Monterey County Sheriff's Department to issue evacuation orders for the region northwest of Sacramento.

Seventeen major fires have been fully contained after consuming over 17,000 acres, including the Southern Fire (5,366 acres burned), also near the Mexican

border. If one adds to that figure the number of fires of 500 acres or less, 29,195 acres have already burned in 3,794 incidents.

The combination of a serious drought with a terrible heat wave affecting California and the western US has led to perfect conditions for such conflagrations. Besides drying out fire-prone vegetation, the hot conditions have led to sharp losses in available water needed not only to produce electricity, but irrigate water-thirsty crops, such as almonds and cotton, and to fight the fires themselves.

Ahead of the official summer fire season this year, between January 1 and June 20, in California alone, there have been 3,270 wildfires that have burned 16,451 acres, compared to 2,625 fires and 19,116 acres for the same period last year.

The early onslaught of fires is the result of the spring heat wave that has brought record temperatures to the west, a "heat dome" that is worsening drought conditions in the entire region, from the Great Plains to the Pacific Coast, including the Pacific Northwest.

In some areas, June temperatures have broken records going back 150 years. On June 19, the National Public Radio website reported temperatures of 54 degrees Celsius (130 Fahrenheit) in California's Death Valley, 48 in Phoenix, Arizona (118 Fahrenheit), 43 in Sacramento (109 Fahrenheit), and nearly 40 in Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington (98 Fahrenheit.) Some forecasts were predicting temperatures of 41 (106 Fahrenheit) and higher in Washington State on Monday.

Thunder and lightning storms are predicted for early this week in southern Oregon, possibly sparking more fires. Fires are also breaking out in eastern Washington, Idaho, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, Montana and New Mexico.

As in California, there are serious concerns about the potential collapse of an antiquated power grid that was

never designed to withstand extreme temperatures.

Observers predict that hundreds of thousands of acres will burn this summer, perhaps establishing a new record (over 4 million acres were destroyed in 2020 in California). At heart is the lack of preparation by governments at every level as the weather across the western part of the country becomes hotter and dryer.

In January 2019, in the wake of the extreme wildfire year of 2018, newly elected Governor Gavin Newsom announced the signing of an executive order declaring “war” on wildfires, promising new measures to “fundamentally change” the state’s response.

Like the state government’s cynical and premature declaration that the coronavirus pandemic was over, at the beginning of 2020, Newsom declared “mission accomplished,” claiming the state had put in place sufficient measures to address the wildfire catastrophe.

However, very little was actually accomplished. A recent investigation by Sacramento’s CapRadio and National Public Radio’s “California Newsroom” found that Newsom has overstated by 690 percent the number of acres treated with fuel brakes and prescribed burns. According to the investigation, Newsom assured the public that the 35 priority projects—anticipated by the 2019 executive order—subjected 90,000 acres to prevention measures. The actual figure was 11,399.

In fact, the CapRadio-NPR investigation found that in 2020, Cal Fire’s fuel reduction measures had dropped by half, to levels below the administration of his predecessor, Jerry Brown.

Newsom is now proposing a \$1.2 billion “wildfire resiliency” fund. That, according to Michael Wara, director of the Climate and Energy Policy Program at Stanford University’s Woods Institute for the Environment, is a fraction of what is needed. “We are in a deep hole,” declared Wara, “and it is going to take us many years of sustained effort to get out.” Wara has called for treating one million acres annually for wildfire prevention, while the state is currently only addressing a tiny fraction of that amount.



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