

Wildfires fueled by heat wave and drought surge across California and western US

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More than 30 million people were under excessive heat warnings or advisories across several Western states last weekend. Weather forecasters are warning of more record high temperatures throughout the region this weekend, with triple digits predicted in the Rocky Mountains region from Bozeman, Montana to Salt Lake City, Utah.

The extreme heat is triggering wildfires across several US states and Canada, requiring evacuations in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and British Columbia.

Firefighters were working in extreme temperatures across the western US and struggling to contain wildfires this week, with the largest burning in California and Oregon, as another heat wave scorched the region and strained power grids. According to the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), this year more than one million acres have burned in 68 large fires and complexes across 12 states.

The largest wildfire of the year in California—the Beckwourth Complex—was raging along the Nevada state line and has burned about 134 square miles (348 square kilometers) as state regulators asked consumers, primarily workers and individual homes, to voluntarily “conserve as much electricity as possible” to avoid any outages starting Monday afternoon, at a time when use of air conditioning is a life or death consideration amid temperatures regularly settling at above 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

In Oregon, the Bootleg Fire exploded to 224 square miles (580 square kilometers) as it raced through a heavily timbered area in the Fremont-Winema National Forest, near the Klamath County town of Sprague River. The fire disrupted service on three transmission lines that provide up to 5,500 megawatts of electricity to neighboring California.

Last Friday, California Governor Gavin Newsom dispatched firefighters from the Bay Area to Oregon to help with containment of the Bootleg Fire. Two strike teams consisting of Type 3 and Type 6 engines from Fremont, Oakland, Hayward, Alameda County, South San Francisco, San Bruno, the Central Fire District, San Mateo and Kentfield were sent north. But the hot and windy conditions in the state became more extreme on Saturday, forcing firefighters to “disengage and move to predetermined safety zones” to avoid “immediate, life-threatening risk” from the Bootleg Fire, the Fremont-Winema National Forest said in a press statement. With the flames threatening 3,000 houses, residents in nearby areas were forced to evacuate, and the danger was so severe that the Klamath County sheriff’s department began issuing citations for people who refused to follow evacuation orders.

A wildfire in southeast Washington has grown to almost 60 square miles (155 square kilometers) as it charred grass and timber while it moved into the Umatilla National Forest. The Red Apple fire burning between the towns of Cashmere and Wenatchee along US Highway 2 in central Washington has grown to 7,000 acres since it broke out Tuesday night, and is threatening 234 homes, a power substation and orchards in the area.

In Idaho, Governor Brad Little declared a wildfire emergency last Friday and has mobilized the National Guard to help fight fires ignited after lightning storms swept across the drought-stricken region.

In Arizona, a small plane crashed Saturday during a survey of a wildfire in rural Mohave County, killing both crew members.

The Beech C-90 aircraft was helping perform reconnaissance over the lightning-caused Cedar Basin Fire, near the tiny community of Wikieup northwest of

Phoenix.

A new fire broke out Sunday afternoon in the Sierra Nevada south of Yosemite National Park, and by evening covered more than 6 square miles (15.5 square kilometers), triggering evacuations in areas of two counties. Containment was just 5 percent, but the highway leading to the southern entrance of the park remained open early Monday.

The wildfires emerge as the West is in the throes of a second extreme heat wave within weeks and as the entire region is suffering from one of the worst droughts in recent history. Extreme heat warnings in California were finally expected to expire Monday night.

The Beckwourth Complex Fire 50 miles north of Lake Tahoe is the largest wildfire of the year so far in California, and this explosive inferno is blazing through the Plumas National Forest and challenging firefighters with its extreme behavior.

The Beckwourth Complex Fire is a combination of two lightning-caused fires near the community of Beckwourth and had consumed 92,988 acres and was 46 percent contained as of Tuesday morning, according to the incident report from the US Forest Service. On Sunday, firefighters were working in temperatures that topped 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 Celsius).

On Saturday, the flames at the Complex also churned up a “firenado.” Firenadoes occur when large wildfires superheat the air, which causes the air to rise. As it rises, it cools and condenses in the upper reaches of the atmosphere, creating unstable conditions and a clash of air that can cause firenadoes to form. Researchers are still examining exactly what conditions lead to firenadoes, but they are among the world’s rarest extreme weather phenomena.

More footage released in the past week by the Forest Service shows that this was not California’s first firenado of the year. The video, shot on June 29, shows a powerful fire cyclone in the Tennant fire in Klamath National Forest near the state’s border with Oregon.

The Beckwourth Complex fire is threatening lives along the state border in Nevada’s Washoe County and, because of increasing wind, evacuation orders went into effect for the Rancho Haven, Fish Springs and Flanigan Flats regions. The Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District tweeted: “Take immediate steps to protect large animals and livestock.”

Late Saturday, flames jumped across highway US 395, which was closed near the town of Doyle, California in Lassen County. The two-lane through highway reopened Sunday, and officials urged motorists to use caution and keep moving along the key north-south route, where flames were still active.

Some eyewitness reports noted that at least six houses had burned in Doyle after Saturday’s blaze. The fire was still smoldering on Sunday in Doyle, but in the remote areas on the mountainsides outside of town the fire was still raging. The ecosystem in the area is parched after two consecutive dry winters. Afternoon high temperatures across the region in the last few days have reached the mid-90s to low 100s.

Meanwhile, the US Congress is at best dragging its feet on a new infrastructure bill which is nominally intended to address climate change problems. The current version of the bill offers \$15 billion in incentives for electric vehicles. The American Jobs Plan had \$85 billion included for public transit, but the Joe Manchin-Bill Cassidy version slashes the amount to \$48.5 billion. The only areas where the two bills are roughly on the same level are related to highways and airports, both of which guarantee decades more carbon pollution. And next to nothing is included to help the immediate needs of millions of people suffering through the current effects of climate change.

Capitalist “free-market solutions” to climate change are a death trap. The only solution to climate change is a planned socialist response directed by the working class, which meets the immediate needs of people across the planet, not the care and nurturing of the bottom lines of billionaires.



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