

Wildfires continue to grow across western North America as another heat wave builds

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27 July 2021

Wildfires in the western US, Alaska and British Columbia continue to spread at a record pace while a third massive heat wave of the summer is building in the US. The National Interagency Fire Center reports that in the US there are currently 79 large fires burning in 12 states that have so far destroyed over 1.5 million acres.

There are currently 20 large wildfires in Idaho, 19 in Montana, 10 in Washington, six in California, six in Alaska, six in Oregon, four in Wyoming, two in Utah, two in Arizona, two in South Dakota, one in Colorado and one in Nevada. Three new large fires have emerged in Idaho and South Dakota.

The widespread fires continue as another heat wave settles in across much of the contiguous US for the week. As of Tuesday, at least 17 states have issued heat warnings or advisories. This follows the record shattering heat wave that occurred in the Pacific Northwest earlier in the summer, and the blistering heat wave that occurred a few weeks ago in the southwest. This latest wave is not expected to lead to as many shattered records as the previous two, but it will at times span from the west to the east coast. Acute elevated heat is expected in Montana and Wyoming. Temperatures are expected to reach as high as 110 degrees Fahrenheit in eastern Montana, but this could be tempered by thick wildfire smoke, which could keep temperatures slightly cooler.

The largest of the fires remains the Bootleg fire in southern Oregon near Klamath Falls. It is currently listed to have burned over 410,000 acres and is 53 percent contained as of Tuesday morning. The Bootleg fire began from a lightning strike on July 6. More than 2,000 firefighters are assigned to the fire, including personnel from over 90 fire departments across the country, and crews of the Oregon National Guard.

In California, the Dixie fire has now burned 200,000 acres as it continues to spread and is at 22 percent containment. The Dixie fire is located 15 miles northeast of the town of Paradise, which was almost completely destroyed in the deadly 2018 Camp Fire which caused at least 85 civilian fatalities.

In British Columbia, Canada, there are currently 226 wildfires burning, 38 of these are considered fires of note, meaning that the fires are highly visible or pose a threat to persons or property. Approximately 1.05 million acres have burned so far this season in the western Canadian province. On Saturday, 101 firefighters from Mexico arrived to help fight the raging fires. At that time there were 3,320 total firefighters engaged in combating the fires in British Columbia.

These wildfires have been intensifying as a result of prolonged dry conditions from severe drought and excessive sustained high heat conditions, both related to global warming. This is leaving vegetation and timber fuels at significantly elevated risk for explosive wildfire. Years of inadequate forest and wildfire management, planning and resources is also playing a factor.

It is under these conditions that the more than 21,000 wild-land firefighters and support personnel are currently assigned to incidents across the US, making their task to contain the fires more difficult and dangerous. The massive plumes of smoke and the hazardous particulate matter it contains from the fires creates severe negative impact on the air quality in the towns and regions near to the fires, which is of course even worse for the firefighters on the ground fighting the blazes.

In the town of Gardnerville, Nevada, 16 miles north of the Tamarack Fire, the air quality index (AQI) for over the past week has been averaging around 150 and

has peaked at nearly 200, which are levels considered “unhealthy” and “very unhealthy.” The local air quality and firefighting efforts got a break on Monday due to shifting winds and thundershowers. This slowed the fire, lowered the risk of resuming its previous rampage, and allowed some evacuation orders to be lifted.

The Tamarack Fire in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest of the California and Nevada Sierra Mountains was first reported July 4 from a lightning strike the previous day. It grew from a single tree to a quarter acre by July 10, and at that time fire officials felt it posed a small risk of spreading. On July 16 the Tamarack Fire broke out as a massive wildfire and has burned through nearly 70,000 acres since that time. It is currently listed at 54 percent contained.

The smoke from the wildfires is also affecting air quality conditions across the US, as it has been steadily spreading east to the Atlantic coast, starkly visible from NASA satellite imagery as smoke eerily blankets much of the country. Smoke advisories have been issued across the western US states including in Alaska as well as in British Columbia.

Wildfires are also burning in other parts of the world, the most significant being in Russian Siberia. According to Euronews, as of Monday, approximately 4.6 million acres of forestland had burned in Russia so far this year, which is an area larger than the US state of Connecticut. The increased severity of fires in these far reaches of the northern hemisphere is alarming from an emissions standpoint, not just from the loss of timber, which is significant, but because of the melting permafrost and burning peat, which had been absorbing carbon for thousands of years that is now being suddenly released back into the atmosphere.



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