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Dixie Fire continues to rage out of control in California as new Caldor Fire sparks further evacuations

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The Dixie Fire in Northern California continues to ravage through the mountain communities of Butte, Plumas, Tehama and Lassen and has forced the evacuation of thousands more people. It has already decimated the towns of Greenville and Canyondam.

The massive fire—the second largest in state history—was forecast to be quelled by August 20. It is still only 33 percent contained and has destroyed over 1,100 structures, including 650 homes and with another 15,000 threatened. Wind from the north fanned the flames yesterday, causing the fire to burn another 9,000 acres overnight. The total burn area is now more than 635,000 acres, nearly 1,000 square miles.

The Dixie fire is currently threatening the town of Susanville, which has a population of 15,000 and includes two prisons. Evacuations are underway as the fire continues to gain ground rapidly. Janesville, another town located 12 miles outside of Susanville, was evacuated Monday evening. On late Tuesday night, the town of Mineral, located in Tehama County, was likewise evacuated.

Megan Bray, a store director at the local Safeway grocery store, whose store posts local updates about the fire, told the *Guardian*, “Every year we are just holding our breath for when it’s going to start. And this year it started way sooner than we expected. ... It has been heartbreaking ... People have been living here for generations and suddenly they’re just having nothing. It’s surreal.”

Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) has shut off power to 51,000 residents in response to the fires combined with a forecast of high winds threatening to knock

down power lines and cause more fires. The dilapidated equipment is suspected to be responsible for the Dixie fire and has been proven to be responsible for several large and devastating wildfires in recent years. The company, which serves over 16 million customers in Northern and Central California, pleaded guilty to 84 counts of felony manslaughter and one felony count of unlawfully causing a fire last year.

The charges were related to the 2018 Camp Fire, which was sparked by a faulty PG&E power line. The company reached a minimal settlement of \$13.5 billion for the victims of that disaster, many thousands of whom lost everything in the blaze. At the same time, PG&E refused to replace old equipment and infrastructure in favor of paying even higher sums to its shareholders and bonuses to itself, and not a single executive has been charged or imprisoned for the lost homes and lives.

There are 10 other fires burning throughout Northern California. One in particular, the Caldor Fire, which began this past Saturday, has already torn through the town of Grizzly Flats, located 65 miles east of the capital of Sacramento.

Driven by strong winds and dry conditions, it quickly expanded to 53,772 acres by Wednesday afternoon. Over 50 homes have so far been lost, two people are seriously injured, and 6,500 residents are currently under evacuation orders. Chris Vestal, a public information officer for Grizzly Flats, announced on Tuesday that, “The fire has grown. It is spreading quickly.” It grew so quickly, in fact, that the fire was well beyond fire crews’ abilities to keep up with it, or

to record accurate documentation of it. Although the department was hopeful that reinforcements would be arriving on Wednesday, only 242 personnel were on the ground as of Tuesday evening.

Derek Shaves, a resident of Grizzly Flats, told the *Guardian* of the town, “It’s a pile of ash. ... Everybody on my block is a pile of ash and every block that I visited, but for five separate homes that were safe, was totally devastated.” Linda Blalock of Pleasant Valley told *Mercury News* that she did not expect the fire to spread so fast. By early Tuesday morning local sheriff’s deputies were pounding on her door, warning her of the fire’s approach. “It ran,” she said. “It just exploded overnight.”

The McFarland (Platina, California) and Monument Fires (Hayfork, California) have also both expanded significantly. Currently, the McFarland Fire has burned over 107,100 acres and the Monument Fire is just over 128,000 acres. Both fires have also been driven by extreme heat and wind gusts of over 30 miles per hour and remain under red-flag warnings.

The increasingly disastrous fires on the West Coast are a result of increasingly hotter and dryer summers, a consequence of global warming, which is being exacerbated by the ongoing drought. There have been approximately 6,540 in California alone this year, beginning as early as January. In total, over 40,000 fires have torched 4 million acres all across the US, with states such as Utah (3), Wyoming (3), Alaska (4), Oregon (11), Washington (19), Idaho (22), and Montana (27) all currently battling their own blazes. In 2015, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) published a report estimating that wildfire seasons are now 78 days longer compared to what they were in the 1970s.

The Center for Disaster Philanthropy states that the United States and Canada have historically shared their resources to see each country through their fire seasons, be it personnel or equipment, such as vehicles and helicopters. However, because each country has been battling numerous fires with larger and more unpredictable fire behavior, this is no longer feasible. When there aren’t enough crew on the ground, international firefighters are called in. Currently, fire fighters from Mexico are assisting with wildfires in Canada, while an air tanker from Australia has been deployed. Last year, firefighters from Mexico, Israel

and Australia were utilized to assist in several large wildfires in California.

In fact, lack of adequate funding and low pay are just a few reasons why retention of fully-staffed fire crews are lacking. Most rookie firefighters working for the federal government are paid as little as \$14 an hour, and many positions do not come with benefits. Zora Thomas, a firefighter in California, stated that around 20 percent of all fire crew vacancies went unfilled last year. “That makes it hard to retain people. ... If you don’t take care of federal firefighters, you don’t understand what they do or who relies on them. It’s a failure to recognize the realities of fighting wildfires and the danger the blaze present to the public,” she wrote on the online climate justice forum, Grist.

The threat of smoke particles amid a resurgence of the coronavirus pandemic presents an additional grim reality for many wildfire victims. As numerous fires release towering plumes of smoke particles, blanketing cities in ash and affecting air quality, conditions such as asthma and cardiovascular diseases are exacerbated by the fumes, sending many people into hospitals already strained under the weight of the pandemic last year, and presenting an additional challenge for those battling COVID-19.

In addition, a new study published in the journal *Science Advances* last Friday details how smoke inhalation may have been responsible for as many as 19,000 COVID cases and 700 deaths during the record-breaking fire season of 2020. Smoke particles, known as PM 2.5, are tiny enough to lodge themselves deep into lung tissue, causing excessive inflammation of the cells lining the airway and lungs. This process can then trigger an immune response in the body, causing the immune system to expend more energy fighting the response, and lowering its ability to respond to diseases such as the coronavirus, leaving the patient vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19.



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