

California's Caldor wildfire forces 22,000 to flee South Lake Tahoe

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The Caldor wildfire in California grew by more than 25,000 acres on Sunday, which forced the evacuation of 22,000 people living in the town of South Lake Tahoe, the most populous city in the Lake Tahoe basin. Thousands of others have been evacuated from the broader region the fire currently threatens, which extends from the western shores of Lake Tahoe to the Nevada border.

The Caldor Fire as a whole has burned more than 204,000 acres, according to the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC). The surge on Sunday was caused by unfavorable weather conditions that drove the flames across the Sierra Nevada mountains and through Eldorado National Forest. As a result, the fire's containment dropped from 19 percent to 14 percent. Similar conditions have persisted through the week, including high temperatures, low humidity and strong winds, including gusts of up to 40 miles per hour. Containment currently stands at 20 percent.

The Sacramento office for the National Weather Service (NWS) has issued a red-flag warning for the region based on these weather conditions, which was slated to continue until Wednesday evening at 11 p.m. The warning noted that gusty winds are likely to continue spreading the fire "over portions of the higher Sierra Nevada" that will "continue areas of critical fire weather conditions" and "contribute to extreme fire behavior."

The NWS warning concluded, "Have a plan ready if you are required to evacuate!"

There are currently 4,224 firefighters attempting to combat the blaze, including resources drawn from state and national agencies such as the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) and the United States Forest Service. Nationally, the NIFC reports that 27,000 firefighters are currently

deployed across the country, including 15,000 in California alone. So far this year there have been 43,017 wildfires, which have burned a total of 4,946,000 acres, more than what was burned to date in 2019 and 2020. The 86 largest have burned more than half of that total, 2,678,196 acres across 11 states, and only one of these, the 22,445-acre Black Butte fire in Oregon, has been fully contained.

Current efforts surrounding the Caldor Fire are being devoted to protecting South Lake Tahoe and redirecting the fire southeast toward the neighboring Tamarack Fire, which has burned more than 68,000 acres and is 82 percent contained. The strategy, as noted by Eric Schwab, an operations section chief with Cal Fire, is that directing an ongoing fire into a region that has already burned this season "basically stops the spread of fire."

There is no guarantee, however, that this containment tactic will work. One of the more difficult aspects of both the Caldor Fire and the much larger Dixie Fire—which has so far burned 844,000 acres and is only 52 percent contained—is that they have flung embers beyond artificial fire breaks made to contain the fires, igniting dry timber behind the firefighters' lines.

These embers are also capable of going over mountain ridges, which is a new threat that has emerged this fire season. In the past, the Sierra Nevada acted as a natural barrier for fires. That is no longer the case: the Dixie and Caldor fires are the first and second wildfires to cross from west to east in US firefighting history.

California's firefighting efforts have been further hampered by various budget cuts implemented by Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom. Just this year, Newsom slashed \$152 million from the state's wildfire prevention efforts. These cuts came after Newsom

touted a \$2 billion wildfire budget for Cal Fire in May, at the time claiming that, “None of us are naive about the challenges that this state faces, for that matter the entire Western United States.”

Firefighting efforts across the country face similar difficulties. The budget appropriated for “wildland fire management” for the US Forest Service has hovered around \$2.2 billion each year even as wildfires get worse. As a result, funds that previously were dedicated to wildfire prevention are used to fight ongoing fires, which in turn provides further fuel for fires in later years in a perpetuating cycle.

More wildfires also mean longer seasons of degraded air quality across California and the country. The air quality across much of Southern California remains at “moderate” levels as a result of the Dixie Fire, indicating that those sensitive to smoke and other particulate matter in the air should stay indoors, an impossibility for the many agricultural workers that are forced to continue working with little to no protection against the smoke. The air quality is similarly bad in parts of Idaho, Utah, Colorado, Texas, Washington, Minnesota and Florida.

Smoke from the Caldor Fire is currently much worse. The Lake Tahoe basin, as well as Carson City and Reno, Nevada all have an air quality index higher than 150, indicating “unhealthy” levels of smoke. At such high levels, federal regulations advise that, “People with heart or lung disease, older adults, children and teens” should “avoid physical activity outdoors” and that everyone else should “keep physical activities short.” Thursday’s forecast for air quality in the region is “very unhealthy,” a further sign of the ongoing severity of the Caldor Fire.

The heightened length, extent and ferocity of wildfires in recent years are due to a combination of the ongoing impacts of human-induced global warming and the steady defunding of firefighting and fire prevention efforts at the state and federal levels. A recent United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report made clear that extreme weather events such as hurricanes, floods, droughts, polar vortexes and wildfires are becoming more common and more destructive as Earth’s temperature is increased through the further release of heat-trapping greenhouse gases as a result of human industrial and agricultural activity.

Most of California itself is currently suffering a state of “extreme drought” or “exceptional drought,” creating ideal conditions for fires to emerge and spread. The IPCC report directly links these conditions to climate change.

And while the report does not say this explicitly, the underlying cause for the increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (primarily carbon dioxide and methane) is the inherently anarchic nature of the capitalist system, in which companies and countries compete with one another for resources and profits. This encourages these entities to burn ever greater quantities of fossil fuels to enrich themselves at the expense of the livelihoods and lives of current and future generations of humanity.



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