

Firefighters in New Mexico face more dangerous conditions as wildfires spread

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The Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak Fire, which has devastated New Mexico's northeastern Mora and San Miguel counties since last month, is expected to worsen after two days of moderated winds and weather conditions allowed firefighters to slow its spread.

Forecasters issued warnings that starting May 19, high fire danger would exist from southern Nevada through parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado and would last for at least three days.

The destruction from the Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak Fire, now categorized as the largest fire in the state's history, has been horrendous. Over 303,000 acres have been burnt and at least 340 homes and 275 other buildings in Mora and San Miguel Counties have been destroyed. Projections of the total loss of buildings range from 1,000 to 1,500.

The fire is the worst of several blazes scorching the state. In the north-central area just 25 miles west of the state capital Santa Fe, the Cerro Pelado Fire has consumed nearly 46,000 acres. It is now considered 75 percent contained.

The Black Fire in Gila National Forest in the southwest has consumed 93,000 acres since it flared up on May 13. The Bear Trap Fire, north of the Black Fire, has burned about 105,000 acres. The containment level of these two wildfires is zero percent.

Authorities have closed some public recreation areas. The Carson and Santa Fe National Forests, as well as the Pecos Canyon State Park, all in the north, have been shut until further notice due to extreme fire danger. In the central part of the state, the Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands west of Albuquerque are partially closed to the public.

The Calf Canyon Fire was the result of a botched prescribed burn carried out by the Forest Service on April 19. Once it got out of control, it merged with the

Hermits Peak Fire, which had been raging since April 6. As of May 19, the Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak Fire was reported as 34 percent contained, though continued aridity and gusty winds could negatively affect containment.

On May 19, the Forest Service released its first full statement about the combined blaze, which said: "Before ignitions ever take place on the landscape, planning happens years before. Landscapes are analyzed for prescribed fire treatments and the effects on vegetation, hydrology, threatened and endangered species, and human social impacts. Standard operating procedures to authorize prescribed fires include developing and coordinating a burn plan, site preparation, public notifications, weather and forecast monitoring and validation before a decision is made to go ahead."

According to the statement, "In rare circumstances, conditions change, and prescribed burns move outside the planned project area and become wildfires. In 99.84 percent of the cases, prescribed fires go as planned. The Forest Service conducts about a hundred prescribed fires each year in the Southwest and has only seen 2 escape containment since 2011, with the Hermits Peak Fire being the 3rd."

The Forest Service promised to complete "an internal Declared Wildfire Review" by mid-June and "will identify and communicate the next steps when the report is finalized."

Although most of these wildfires had begun in April, it was not until May 4 that the Biden White House declared a state of emergency, making funding available to "affected individuals" for "temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses, and other programs to help individuals and business owners recover from the

effects of the disaster” in the five most affected counties.

The declaration continued: “Federal funding also is available to state and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations on a cost-sharing basis for emergency protective measures (Category B), limited to direct federal assistance and reimbursement for mass care, including evacuation and shelter support in the counties of Colfax, Lincoln, Mora, San Miguel and Valencia.

“Lastly, Federal funding is also available on a cost-sharing basis for hazard mitigation measures statewide.”

About 2,100 firefighters have been deployed to the region and they have been frantically installing portable sprinkler systems in inhabited areas, while helicopters have brought loads of water to the fire line and bulldozers have carved paths in the ground to block the fire.

Not only is the response of the administration a stark example of “too little, too late,” it is an indictment of decades of willful neglect and refusal to heed warnings from scientists about the likelihood of extreme weather events brought on by human-produced climate change. Years of defunding of necessary systems have exacerbated the crisis.

The Southwest is in the grip of its worst drought in centuries. In the first week of May, more than 98 percent of the Southwest was in drought, and, with the exception of Washington state, reservoir storage levels were below normal in all Western states. In March, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicted “prolonged, persistent drought in the West where below-average precipitation is most likely.”

Climate change and extreme weather are not confined to the American Southwest, or to the United States. As with the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental degradation affects every nation—and every person—on earth.

Natural disasters have always been a part of the planet’s history, but in recent years human activity has played a greater and greater role in the occurrence and severity of floods, storms, fires, droughts and other extreme weather events. The human race is now in a situation that requires planning, preparation and international cooperation to lessen and if possible

reverse their impact.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* declared last August:

For the capitalist class, however, stopping civilization-ending cataclysms is far less important than preserving their profits. As has been the case for decades, ExxonMobil, BP and other major fossil fuel corporations, as well as the hedge funds and Wall Street banks that own their stocks, are most concerned that coal, oil and gas continue to be mined and sold to further enrich themselves and their fellow oligarchs. If Earth will be poisoned and burned in that pursuit, so be it.



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