

Extreme heat, drought and record-breaking wildfires hit Louisiana

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As part of the ongoing global trend of worsening environmental conditions as a result of capitalist-induced climate change, the state of Louisiana has experienced highly abnormal weather patterns throughout the summer. Typically recognized as the wettest state in the contiguous US, it is witnessing an unusually prolonged period of drought and wildfire activity, fueled by extreme heat.

Multiple high temperature records, some of which date back to the nineteenth century, have been broken throughout the state. The month of July, while being the hottest recorded month globally thus far in human history, was also the hottest for the capital city, Baton Rouge. Triple-digit temperatures have been the norm, not the exception throughout the state, with heat advisories issued around the clock by the National Weather Service (NWS).

In conjunction with the effects of the current El Niño weather pattern, a persistent heat dome has been one of the factors exacerbating temperatures. Caused by a stationary area of high atmospheric pressure trapping in warm air blown from the Gulf of Mexico and other large bodies of water—where surface temperatures have been 90-or-more degrees Fahrenheit (32-plus-degrees Celsius)—and preventing the formation of rain clouds, large swathes of the US have endured this phenomenon throughout the summer, as have parts of Mexico, Europe, North Africa and South Asia.

Meteorologist-in-charge for the NWS in New Orleans, Benjamin Schott, told local news, “No person alive in the city has ever experienced a summer like this.”

Children, the elderly, the homeless population (including those on the verge of homelessness) and workers that have to work outside are the most vulnerable to extreme heat.

Ben Broussard of the Catholic Charities of Acadiana described the impact the heat is having on the homeless, saying, “It is, at the best, uncomfortable. At the worst, is dangerous, depending on available shade and hydration.” He revealed, “We’ve had folks coming in with third-degree burns. It’s seriously dangerous outside for folks who don’t have any way of getting out of it.”

The Louisiana Department of Health has recorded 16 heat-related deaths since the month of June. Addie Duval, vice president of the Greater Baton Rouge chapter of the non-profit Start Corporation, said, “We’re definitely aware of at least a couple of heat-related deaths.”

The unrelenting heat has pushed local and state officials to declare states of emergency. The press release for the “State of

Emergency for Extreme Heat” declared by the Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards on August 14 stated, “The Louisiana Department of Health reports that the state has already exceeded the average number of annual heat-related emergency room visits.”

Another component influencing the declaration was the fact that “drought conditions and a significant drop in the Mississippi River’s water level have added stress on water supplies and agriculture.”

State Climatologist and Louisiana State University (LSU) professor Barry Keim told local news, “The only place that gets more rain [than Louisiana] is Hawaii, and they only just barely beat us out.” Yet, Louisiana has experienced drought conditions ranging from abnormal to exceptional since July, according to Drought.gov, affecting over 4 million people.

Similar data released by the US Drought Monitor last Tuesday indicated that almost half of the state is experiencing extreme drought. Rainfall deficits are acutely high in the southern portion of the state, including the New Orleans area.

Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry commissioner Mike Strain noted that throughout the state are “dry trees, dry grass, dry ground,” and that “a little breeze pushing by and it’s the perfect scenario for wildfires.”

Even thunderstorms present a hazard in such conditions, which, combined with relatively low humidity, are known as “fire weather.” Cameron Kowalski, NWS forecaster in Lake Charles, said, “We at the Weather Service are very wary and watching any storms that pop up, especially because of the lightning and then looking for traces of possible wildfire systems behind them.”

As of last weekend, over 400 wildfires have been burning across the state, devastating tens of thousands of acres in under one month, far more than was burned in all of 2022 and several times what was burned in 2020 and 2021.

Many of the wildfires have been concentrated in the western and central parishes (counties) of the state, but others have appeared in the New Orleans area, including in the Bayou Sauvage Urban National Wildlife Refuge.

The largest fire in the state’s history is currently burning in Beauregard Parish near the Texas state border. Named the Tiger Island Fire, it has already consumed between 30,000 and 60,000 acres (12,141 and 24,281 hectares), according to different estimates, more than double the size of Manhattan. Only 50 percent contained as of this writing, the wildfire has caused several

rural towns, including Merryville, Singer and Evans to be placed under a mandatory evacuation order.

The state's available resources to fight the fires are being exhausted. On one hand, the drought conditions have depleted the amount of water available for firefighters. The fire chief in St. Tammany Parish said, "In rural fire districts such as mine, we have no hydrants. We only have creeks, ponds and rivers. When those dry up, we're out."

On the other hand, most firefighters have to go out of state to receive training for fighting wildfires, with the president of the Louisiana Fire Chiefs Association, Charles Pinkston, admitting, "Our knowledge, skills and abilities are not tuned to fight wildfires."

The sheer scale and quantity of wildfires throughout the state have led many officials to comment along the lines of Commissioner Strain, who said, "This is unprecedented. We've never had to fight this many fires simultaneously and for this duration and intensity."

Rubayet Bin Mostafiz, an assistant professor at LSU AgCenter, told the *Times-Picayune*, "This combination of wildfire, extreme heat and drought were not common in Louisiana before 2000," and that, "These three together are happening more, and the state is not prepared for that."

From the local to the federal level, this lack of state preparation in response to intensifying global warming is not unique to Louisiana, or any one country for that matter.

Lisa Benton-Short, a geography professor at George Washington University, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "One of the things that's happening with climate change is that we're also seeing places experience things that they haven't had before." She went on to say, "Yes, Hawaii has had some issues with wildfires, but nothing like this—nothing like the firestorms that Colorado and California have experienced over the last seven to 10 years. That wasn't forefront on their minds in terms of being disaster-ready."

A report issued in February 2022 by the United Nations Environment Programme found that "Climate change and land-use change are projected to make wildfires more frequent and intense, with a global increase of extreme fires of up to 14 per cent by 2030, 30 per cent by the end of 2050 and 50 per cent by the end of the century."

Of the many health risks associated with wildfires is the inhalation of wildfire smoke, which the UN report notes causes "respiratory and cardiovascular impacts and increased health effects for the most vulnerable."

With wildfires burning throughout the state, cities and towns throughout Louisiana have not been spared the same hazardous air quality that has repeatedly plagued the northern portion of the US, with wildfire smoke continuing to blow southward from Canada's ongoing and historic wildfire season.

Another universal trend is the increased scale of property damage. Though they have burned in sparsely populated rural areas so far, the Louisiana wildfires have already produced a loss of hundreds of millions of dollars for livestock and agricultural farmers. These figures must be taken in conjunction with the economic impact on urban infrastructure to get a fuller picture of the overall financial damage, which is bound to worsen

exponentially as the overall effects of climate change continue unabated under capitalism.

For example, the US Senate Budget Committee cited in a report issued in March on "The Economic Costs of Wildfires" a 2017 report issued by the National Institute of Standards and Technology, which found that "The annualized economic burden from wildfire is estimated to be between \$71.1 billion to \$347.8 billion (\$2016 US). Annualized costs are estimated to range from \$7.6 billion to \$62.8 billion. Annualized losses are estimated to range from \$63.5 billion to \$285.0 billion."

While the ruling class tallies these figures as stemming from "natural" and "unforeseen" disasters, Benton-Short correctly noted, "This is not just Mother Nature—society has had some impacts that have magnified, or exacerbated, the impacts that these disasters have," adding that "we have to look deeper at a variety of social, economic and political factors that have exacerbated vulnerabilities."

However, emblematic of the response from the entire ruling capitalist class to the catastrophe meted out by climate change on the working class and poor is the recent statement from Governor Bel Edwards, who encouraged those confronting an entirely preventable fate to "believe in the power of prayer" and "pray for the rain we need." Such sentiments were repeated by the Republican State Attorney General Jeff Landry, the front-runner in the upcoming gubernatorial election, who also appeals to the population to pray for rain.

The worthless "thoughts and prayers" from Bel Edwards and Landry are just as empty as those uttered from President Joe Biden in response to the conflagration in Maui, who initially had "no comment" to make in response to the deadliest wildfire in the US in more than 100 years which has killed at least 115 people.

The form of the response from both the Democrats and Republicans may differ, but the content is identical. While the Republican Party trips over itself in its transformation into an undisguised fascist party, wholly ridiculing the very conception of climate change in defense of naked corporate profit, the Democratic Party continues to prioritize imperialist wars and Wall Street bailouts, invariably proclaiming that "there is no money" on hand and looking the other way when predictable "natural" disasters strike the working class.



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