

Record-breaking Texas wildfires scorch more than 1 million acres in Panhandle region

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After first igniting on Monday, five active wildfires continued to ravage large areas in the Texas Panhandle region north of Amarillo, with the danger of more destruction over the next several days. At one point on Tuesday, the cluster of fires in the region totaled seven, but two were declared fully contained on Wednesday.

Over the course of two days, the cluster of wildfires torched over 1 million acres, documented by numerous viral images and videos shared over social media which provide a shocking view of the fiery destruction.

The blazes are just five out of 23 active wildfires burning across the state of Texas and are considered the most threatening.

The active wildfires, titled Smokehouse Creek, Windy Deuce, 687 Reamer, Magenta and Grapevine, continued to rage into the evening on Wednesday. Grapevine and Magenta were 60 and 65 percent contained, while the largest out-of-control blaze, the Smokehouse Creek fire, is only 3 percent contained and is deemed the largest threat. It is the state's largest wildfire on record, burning an estimated 1,075,000 acres by early Thursday.

Thousands of residents have lost their homes or have been forced to evacuate areas in the path of the deadly blazes. In addition, several highways and roads have been forced by the wildfires to shut down to travel, making evacuation difficult.

Most alarming, on Tuesday, Pantex, a nuclear weapons manufacturing plant located northeast of Amarillo, was forced to shut down operations and evacuate most of its staff due to the threat of the encroaching flames of the Windy Deuce fire.

Located on a 16,000 acre site, Pantex is one of six manufacturing facilities in the United States under the authority of the National Nuclear Security Administration's Nuclear Security Enterprise.

Designated a National Security Site, its operations are tightly run under a cloak of secrecy.

The site houses 650 buildings and employs 4,200 workers. Since 1975, the facility has been the main site in the US for the assembly and disassembly of atomic weapons. According to the facility's website, it claims to have "dismantled thousands of weapons retired from national stockpiles" and that it "places the resulting plutonium in interim storage."

On Wednesday morning, Pantex declared the fire threat had passed and reopened the plant for normal operations.

The destructive dimensions of the Smokehouse Creek fire, which ignited in the afternoon on Monday, has expanded to over 1,500 square miles, burning an area larger than the state of Rhode Island. The previous record for the largest fire was the East Amarillo Complex fire in 2006, which burned down 1,400 square miles and resulted in 13 deaths.

Giving a measure of the Smokehouse Creek fire's ferocity, in a space of a few hours, its burn area went from 300,000 acres on Tuesday to 850,000 acres on Wednesday.

The raging flames, fueled by high winds and unseasonably hot and dry weather, scorched through substantial stretches of small towns and farming communities in the Panhandle region with surprising speed. On Thursday, the fire moved east, blazing through parts of neighboring Oklahoma along the border.

On Tuesday, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties impacted or threatened by wildfires, pledging to commit "all resources needed to protect our fellow Texans and their property."

Bill Kendall, the Hemphill County emergency

management coordinator in the town of Canadian, located in the eastern Panhandle on the border with Oklahoma, described the destruction of the fire to the media, “Like a moonscape... it’s all gone.” A statement by Canadian town officials on Tuesday “strongly urged residents to evacuate.”

Kendall reported that around 40 homes were burned around the perimeter of Canadian, but no buildings within the town proper had been lost. He added that he witnessed scores of cattle scattered in fields, burned to death.

The only reported death came on Wednesday when Joyce Blankenship, an 83-year-old retired substitute teacher from the small town of Stinnett, was found dead in her home. As the wildfires continue to rage, authorities warned that the death toll may be higher, as rescue crews have been unable to reach many areas to conduct searches for victims.

The chief of the Texas Division of Emergency Management, Nim Kidd, told media, “I believe the fire will grow before it gets fully contained.” He warned that the damage to some communities is extensive.

The catalyst for the wildfires ravaging across the dry, grassy, brush-filled Texas Panhandle is capitalist-induced climate change, and along with other natural disasters, takes place under a ruling class that subordinates every aspect of American society under the profit interests of the corporate oligarchy. Scientists estimate that a warming climate has put residents of the Panhandle at 50 percent or higher chance of being affected by a major wildfire over the next three decades.

No faction of the ruling class and its political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties is able to address the dire emergency that climate change poses to humanity and the environment.

The Republican-dominated Texas state government under Republican Governor Greg Abbott have shown nothing but contempt for the safety of the Texas population.

The most stark example was the state’s criminal response to the 2021 devastating snow storm and cold snap, which knocked down the power grid leaving 4 million without heat or electricity for several days, resulting in 700 deaths.

The blackout and the government’s criminal response was a direct result of its subordination of the safety and

well-being of the population under the profit considerations of the Texas private electric utility firm ERCOT.



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