Record breaking Texas Panhandle wildfires blaze into second week

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After burning more than one million acres in the past week, four separate wildfires continue to sweep across the Texas Panhandle through several counties north of Amarillo, resisting the efforts of fire crews, with the raging flames surging over the state border into Oklahoma.

In the period of a week, the cluster of wildfires have scorched an area across the region greater than 1,700 square miles (4,403 square kilometers).

Contributing to the dry, hot conditions across the southern United States fueling the fires is the climate phenomenon El Nino, which causes warming of the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean's surface waters and influences weather patterns from Australia to the Americas. This has produced record shattering warm winter temperatures and lower moisture across much of the United States.

The impact of capitalist-induced climate change has contributed to the increase in wildfires and their intensity. Just in the last year, devastating and record-breaking blazes have sparked from Canada, to Chile, and Greece. Currently, there are wildfires raging on every continent around the globe even as fire season is still a month away in the Northern Hemisphere and approaching its typical end in the Southern Hemisphere.

Speaking to the climate change-fueled phenomenon of simultaneous wildfires occurring around the world, Hamish Clarke, a senior research fellow at the University of Melbourne's Flare Wildfire Research Group, told Bloomberg, "Climate is connected to fire in many ways — most obviously through extreme weather conditions — but climate also influences ignitions, fuel, moisture and the growth of vegetation. In many cases it's going to make things much, much worse."

The Panhandle wildfires follow last year's record-breaking fires in Canada, with its large emissions of smoke, soot, and ash traveling for thousands of miles. The Canada blazes were sparked by a similar pattern of hot, dry weather, providing the perfect conditions for fire outbreaks, conditions which have continued to prevail heading into this year's fire season. Some of last year's fires in Canada's vast forested northwest have continued to burn underground through the winter and are primed to re-erupt.

According to updates posted on Wednesday to the website of the Texas A&M Forest Service which maintains a tracking service of wildfires in the state, the cluster of fires in the Panhandle still raged with varying degrees of containment.

After igniting Monday last week, the Smokehouse Creek fire in Hutchinson County, the largest of the cluster and the largest fire recorded in the state's history, has burned nearly 1.1 million acres (445,154 hectares) alone; an area approximately five times greater than New York City. According to reports on Tuesday, the Smokehouse Creek fire was 44 percent contained.

The Windy Deuce fire in Moore County, which threatened nuclear weapons facility Pantex last week, forcing it to to shut down operations for a day, has scorched 144,206 acres. It was reported as 81 percent contained.

The Grape Vine Creek fire in Gray County has scorched 35,000 acres (14,164 hectares) at 77 percent containment. The Magenta (Oldham County) and 687 Reamer (Hutchinson County) fires together burned more than 5,300 acres (2,145 hectares). Magenta and 687 Reamer are reportedly 100 percent contained.

A new fire, the Roughneck, flared up Sunday evening near Sanford in Hutchinson County, causing the evacuation of around 200 families. After burning 300

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acres (121 hectares), blaze is 100 percent contained.

The suppression efforts of firefighters have had a reduced impact at extinguishing the fire clusters due to the extremely dry conditions and high temperatures. Further hampering efforts are persistent high winds that have quickly spread the flames across large areas of the Panhandle.

Fire crews were hopeful that by Thursday and Friday, when rain and cooler temperatures are anticipated, that efforts to suppress the fires will meet better success.

Three deaths have so far been reported by Texas authorities due to the fires. Last week, 83-year-old retired school teacher Joyce Blankenship was found dead in her home, and Cindy Owen was driving in Hemphill County when she encountered the smell of smoke from her vehicle. When she exited to investigate, she was engulfed in flames. Early Tuesday, Zeb Smith, the Fire Chief of Fritch, Texas was reported dead from injuries sustained during the fighting of a structural fire.

Texas authorities reported to media that 500 structures, including many homes, have been destroyed by the blazes over the past week. Additionally, thousands of cattle have perished across the Panhandle, leaving ranchers with catastrophic financial losses.

Texas Republican Governor Greg Abbott visited the Panhandle town of Canadian on Tuesday, one of the most devastated by the fires. Since the start of the blazes, Abbott has given his typical insincere proclamations of sympathy towards the victims of the blazes while avoiding any reference to the destructive reality of climate change.

On the Office of the Governor's web site, Abbott stated, "As Texans in the Panhandle respond to these devastating wildfires, the State of Texas continues working around the clock to swiftly provide the necessary resources to protect Texans. The safety and well-being of impacted Texans is our No. 1 priority as the potential for more dangerous wildfires persists in the coming days."

Adherence to climate science should form the basis of any plan to address its intensifying effects on the planet, including wildfires, hurricanes, and other natural disasters. Along with strict orientation on a scientific basis, appropriate funding should be allocated to countering its impact on the environment and humanity.

But to carry out any such program is a futile prospect under the existing capitalist set up, in which the ruling elite subordinate every aspect of society under the profit system.

While Texans lose their homes and even their lives, the ruling class demands that its profit interests be prioritized over the allocation of funding to ameliorate the social catastrophe to the population by wildfires.

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