

Northern California's Park Fire rages, on track to become state's largest on record

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Northern California's Park Fire, now spanning more than 350,000 acres, is on track to become the state's largest wildfire on record and continues to burn. According to a report by climate scientist Dr. Daniel Swain for Weather West, some predict the fire, currently only 10 percent controlled, could continue until the rainy season in the fall, expanding uphill toward the Nevada border and downhill toward the Sacramento River and the Pacific Coast.

The Park Fire is one of more than two dozen wildfires currently raging in the Western US and Western Canada. It allegedly began as an act of arson when a man, who was later arrested, pushed a burning vehicle down a 60-foot embankment, catching vegetation on fire in a gully along Bidwell Park, which borders the city of Chico, California, with 101,000 inhabitants.

The other fires, including the Jasper Fire in Alberta, Canada, and fires across the Pacific Northwest, were ignited by bolts of lightning. Jasper, with over 5,000 inhabitants, was largely destroyed by the fire there.

Dr. Swain describes visiting Jasper a few years ago with another climate scientist and noticing how susceptible the whole area was to a major wildfire because of "the degree of obvious fire-risk, the very closely-spaced conifers, the obvious lack of recent fire history, the number of dead and downed trees from bark-beetle infestations."

Some 4,000 inhabitants have been evacuated from the Chico suburbs due to the Park Fire. To the east, residents were evacuated from Paradise, which was destroyed by the Camp Fire in November 2018 and has yet to be fully rebuilt.

Pushed by winds and fed by dry grasses and thick woods, the Park Fire worked its way to the northeast, along the Sacramento River Valley and toward the mountains of the Cascade Range at a brisk 2 to 3 miles

per hour. It is still advancing in a triangular pattern on its eastern and northern flanks.

Western North America has been under a brutal heat wave, with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) in many places. That, coupled with vegetation that had been fed by relatively excessive rains in 2022 and 2023 and cooler temperatures, has led to the dangerous conditions. While spring 2024 was also relatively wet for California, this summer's heat has made for a very active fire season.

Other factors contributing to the explosion of fires in Western North America are the excessively hot summers, coupled with the thickness of wooded areas, the abundance of underbrush, the existence of commercial lumber plantations and, most recently, the increase in bark beetles that have expanded north as the climate warms.

These conditions have increased the number and severity of fires from Puebla in central Mexico, through California and the Pacific Northwest into Canada. For forestry scientists, these fires were predictable given the factors cited above.

Megafires, fires that burn more than 100,000 acres, have become common in Western North America. Coupled with years of global warming and increasing drought is the collapse of fire management measures, such as the removal of underbrush and the practice of controlled burns. This was explained in a 2017 TED talk by wildfire scientist Paul Hessburg: "Why wildfires have gotten worse and what we can do about it."

Rather than invest in prevention, authorities have opted for firefighting measures once the fires begin, ignoring the advice of scientists for preventive measures. This is accompanied by denials of the role

that human activity and fossil fuels play in global warming.

The region affected by the Park Fire is relatively underpopulated, but this assumes that this wildfire will not shift westward toward the Sacramento River, and northward toward populated cities near Redding. In addition, the smoke from this and other wildfires will drift to populated areas in Nevada, Oregon and California itself, affecting the health of inhabitants. A new phrase coming into use is “smoke brain,” which describes the symptoms associated with breathing toxic smoke generated by super-charged forest fires, even distant ones.

In addition to the Jasper and Park fires, fires in eastern Oregon (Durkee Fire, 300,000 acres, 0 percent contained; and the Cow Valley Fire, 135,000 acres, 78 percent contained) threaten populated areas in this region of the state.



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