

Drought-fueled wildfires create dangerous conditions in New York and New Jersey

Robert Milkowski, Sandy English
18 November 2024

Extreme drought conditions across the Northeastern United States, ongoing for several weeks, have fueled in an inordinate number of dangerous wildfires throughout the region.

The Jennings Creek Wildfire along the New York/New Jersey border caused the evacuation of about 170 homes on Sunday in Warwick, New York. The fire has been raging since Tuesday and burnt over 4,000 acres. The New York state Air National Guard has dropped 22,000 gallons of water on the fire and extinguished 90 percent of it.

A further 35 homes were evacuated in nearby Greenwood Lake as well as surrounding recreational areas. One young park aide was killed after he was struck by a falling tree while he was battling flames in Greenwood Lake.

A wildfire broke out last week in New York City in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, one of the famous parks designed, like Central Park in Manhattan, by Frederick Law Olmsted in the 19th Century. 140 firefighters from the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) fought a blaze in Manhattan's Inwood Park. Fires continue to burn in Sterling State Park, about 40 miles north of the city in Orange County.

According to the FDNY, "Since October 17, there have been 378 brush fires citywide, compared to 174 brush fires over the same period of the previous three years combined."

Adam Douty, a senior meteorologist at AccuWeather, was quoted by the media as saying, "An extraordinary high pressure weather system has been lingering for weeks that has crushed the occasional storm systems trying to sweep down from Canada. The dry atmosphere and dry ground combine to stifle weak weather systems trying to break through."

He noted that some of the worst-hit areas could require 7 inches or more of rain to end the dry spell. While some

rain is expected midweek, it is not clear how much.

Red flag warnings for wildfires, which indicate, "the imminent danger of severe fire weather with a relatively high probability of occurrence," according to the National Weather Service, have been issued from Virginia to Maine, indicating the high likelihood of additional wildfire outbreaks in the coming days and maybe weeks. These warnings are issued by the National Weather Service when a combination of warm temperatures, humidity of 15 percent or less and wind gusts of 25 mph or more for 3 hours over a 4-hour period are expected to increase the risk of fire danger.

The National Weather Service issued red flag warnings for all of Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island along with northeastern parts of New Jersey, specifically in the counties bordering New York City. As of Thursday, alerts were in place for all of New York City and Long Island as well as many of New York States' regions and counties. All contain areas where wildfires—as of Sunday—are continuing to destroy thousands of acres of forests.

New York Governor Kathy Hochul and New York City Mayor Eric Adams have enforced both burn bans and water conservation initiatives.

A haze—that could be seen from as far as 16 miles west in Essex County, New Jersey—enveloped the Manhattan city skyline last week caused by the smoke of pernicious brush fires throughout New York City's boroughs.

Beyond the direct dangers the fires present to firefighters and area residents, their smoke has presented health risks to millions of people in the area.

Weather services and some government agencies regularly issue air quality warnings in the city but state authorities have given little to no advice or assistance for the population to protect themselves from the smoke.

On its website, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, noted: "Smoke from a fire contains a mix of gasses, particles and chemicals. If you

breathe in smoke, you may experience temporary health symptoms like eye, nose and throat irritation, trouble breathing, or chest pain.”

But that is about as far as any concern by the government for protection from smoke goes. Accurate information on the possible long-term effects of smoke inhalation, even miles from the sources of a fire, is generally unavailable to the public on state and city media.

This is hardly surprising. The systematic campaign against COVID-19 mitigations in the last four years by the Democratic Party, which controls the governments in the city and state, have made it all but impossible to recommend the use of KN- or N-95 masks, which would offer a degree of protection from the ambient smoke.

The World Socialist Web Site has noted the dangers of this smoke inhalation in accurate and concrete terms:

Wildfires release enormous quantities of carbon dioxide, black and brown carbon, ozone precursors, and volatile and semi-volatile organic materials and nitrogen oxides that form ozone. Even more dangerous is the organic particulate matter known as PM2.5, fine particles that are equal to or less than 2.5 microns, smaller than the size of SARS-CoV-2 aerosols, which can bypass all the respiratory mechanisms that would prevent their entry deep into the lungs and circulatory system. The primary mechanism of injury is thought to be from the free radicals, metal and organic compounds in these fine particulates, that lead to formation of hydroxyl radicals which cause damage to the lung cells’ DNA, contributing to various pathologies including lung cancers.

On Tuesday, Hochul visited the site of a deadly 5,000-acre wildfire— that is still burning as of Sunday—along the New York-New Jersey border, the same fire that claimed the life of 18-year-old Dariel Vasquez, the parks worker who was killed. Vasquez, a recent high school graduate, preparing to go to college next fall, lacked the 40 hours of training required to become an entry level firefighter. Part of that training teaches situational awareness that helps a firefighter identify potential dangers, like falling trees.

After announcing the ban on grilling, Hochul told the press that expected winds of 25-35 mph in the area of the

wildfire will cause, “turmoil, chaos and a lot of uncertainty that we don’t need right now.” She added that because the state could see an atypically dry winter, water conservation efforts could continue for months.

The cause of the unusually dry conditions has been attributed by scientists to climate change which is being driven by the emissions from industrial production. While the impact of climate change in New York and New Jersey in recent years has been manifested in torrential rains with large quantities of water falling in short periods of time—often as much as 5 inches in a single hour—a whole slew of extreme weather conditions has plagued the area. The National Weather Service has observed that 32 tornadoes in New York have been reported to date in 2024—compared to 10 in 2023 and 7 in 2022—as well as hurricanes, which have caused extensive damage. Drought is now also presenting dangers to the population.

CNN noted that “Only 0.01 inch of precipitation was recorded in October in New York City, making it the driest month in the city since record keeping began in 1869,” a spokesperson for the New York City Emergency Management said.

In New Jersey, where firefighters in Passaic County are battling the Greenwood Lake Wildfire on the New Jersey side of the border with New York, the Governor and billionaire former banker, Phil Murphy, observed that the fires were the result of climate change.

While this is correct, for a capitalist politician to state it means little. Murphy presented climate change only as a series of symptoms, like the wildfires in Western United States and Canada, which humans can react to, but not control. His solution was to ask people to take shorter showers and turn off the faucet when brushing teeth to conserve water.

The incoming Trump Administration, which intends to roll back funding to combat climate change, and indeed is backed by the most anti-scientific layers of the ruling elite that deny its very existence, will only make the occurrence of disasters such as the wildfires throughout North America more frequent and more dangerous.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact