

Japan experiences largest wildfire in 50 years

Ben McGrath
7 March 2025

Japan's largest wildfire in decades has been burning in the northeastern region of the country for more than a week. While rain in recent days has appeared to halt the fire's spread, firefighters are continuing to bring it under control. Thousands have evacuated and at least one fatality has been reported.

As of Friday, the fire in Ofunato, Iwate Prefecture had burned 2,900 hectares of land, 9 percent of the city's area. The last major wildfire in Japan of this magnitude occurred in 1975 when 2,700 hectares of land were burned in Kushiro, Hokkaido.

At least 78 homes have been destroyed while 4,596 people were ordered to evacuate. Until yesterday, 1,239 people were staying in 12 evacuation centers. Another 3,055 people were staying with friends and family members. In some cases, evacuees have been forced to live out of their cars.

Approximately 2,000 firefighters and members of the Self-Defense Forces (Japan's military) were deployed to fight the blaze.

On Friday, the Ofunato government issued a partial lifting of evacuation orders impacting 957 people living in the city's Akasakicho district. However, evacuation orders remained in place for other sections of the city as firefighters sought to confirm that the fire was no longer spreading.

Toshifumi Onoda, a spokesman for the local fire department, stated on Friday, "Aerial reconnaissance this morning has not confirmed any spread of fire, fire reaching buildings, or white smoke." However, firefighters were still checking the forests for smoldering embers to ensure that the fire had been put out.

The fire began on February 26 under dry conditions, in part caused by low snowfall this year. It was the driest winter since 1946, when record-keeping began, the Japan Meteorological Agency stated. A dry-weather advisory had been in effect since February 18. On

Wednesday, 26.5 millimeters of rain fell in Ofunato, more than the entire month of February, which saw just 2.5 millimeters of rain, a record low for the month.

Ofunato is located in northeastern Honshu, Japan's main island. At least two other wildfires began around the city prior to the latest blaze, including on February 19 and February 25. Both were extinguished, but gave an indication of the danger that existed.

In addition, a large amount of kindling had accumulated on the forest floor in the region, including dry branches and fallen leaves, allowing the fire to spread more easily. Many of the trees are pine, which are highly flammable. Firefighting officials expressed concern that even if flames are extinguished on the tops of trees, embers beneath the kindling could continue to smolder and possibly reignite the blaze.

Akira Kato, an associate professor in forestry at Chiba University, explained to the media that three factors drove the Ofunato wildfire. First, the extended period of dryness the region has experienced this year. Second, the lack of undergrowth management in the forests around the city. He stressed that regular maintenance is necessary to prevent forest fires and to reduce their impact. Finally, the rugged terrain in the region makes it easier for wildfires to spread.

The intensity of the fire has shocked Ofunato city residents and people throughout Japan who believed that such large fires did not occur in humid countries. Kato explained in the *Japan Times*, "There is a big misconception that fires don't occur in humid climates, but this is actually not true, and forest fires can occur anywhere in the world." There are approximately 1,200 reported cases of wildfires in Japan each year, typically between January and May.

Natural disasters cannot be entirely predicted or prevented, but often they are compounded by inadequate planning and willful neglect by capitalist governments. "When fires occurred, (nature) was able

to properly handle it in a natural cycle, but humans cut down trees and developed forests in various ways, disrupting this cycle,” Kato explained. “Once we’ve planted trees and meddled with nature, we need to have a sense of responsibility to continue to maintain it.” This includes regularly removing kindling and other materials that can cause fires to rapidly spread.

This basic maintenance, necessary to protect people’s homes and lives, did not take place, with inadequate attention paid to the country’s forests and to safety more broadly.

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba announced on Thursday, during a parliamentary upper house budget committee meeting, that he would apply the Natural Disaster Victims Relief Law to the victims of the Ofunato, claiming Tokyo would offer “generous financial support” to local governments. Victims, many of whom have had their whole lives turned upside down, will be offered a paltry 3 million yen (\$US20,278) to rebuild their homes.

At the same time, the government has repeatedly earmarked record spending for imperialist war against China, including 8.7 trillion yen for 2025.

Wildfires in Japan and around the world are not simply the result of neglect, but the criminal attitude capitalist governments have taken to climate change. Last year was the hottest year on record, with the United Nations World Meteorological Organization confirming in January that temperatures had risen 1.55 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels.

This surpassed the 1.5-degree rise that governments had agreed to keep below in the 2015 Paris Agreement. This supposed limit, itself inadequate to protect the environment, is in fact ignored, as the major capitalist powers responsible for climate change base their policies on the profit interests of big business, not science and human need.

Extreme wildfire activity around the globe has more than doubled over the past two decades. Northern and temperate forest regions are particularly affected. This includes Japan, which had its hottest year on record in 2024. Wildfire seasons are also becoming longer as conditions become drier.

Kaitlyn Trudeau, a senior research associate at Climate Central told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that large fires, once rare, are becoming more common as weather patterns shift. Trudeau stated,

“Climate change doesn’t directly start fires, but what it is doing is making the conditions which allow fires to burn larger, faster, and become harder to fight more frequent and severe.”

This was highlighted most recently for millions around the world by the devastating wildfires that tore through Los Angeles, California in January. The danger from these fires will not disappear on their own. Addressing them requires a planned economy based on social need, not private profits.



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