

United States & Climate Change: The Explosion of Fires in Western U.S.

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The world has seen the images of the fires raging along the Pacific Coast of the United States, from the borders of Canada to Mexico.

As of September 15, there are about 100 large fires, and many smaller ones, raging in the states of Washington, Oregon and California. A blanket of unhealthy smoke covers much of these states creating apocalyptic scenes.

The smoke has spread to states to the east, including Idaho, Colorado and Nevada. Fires have been reported there also.

One apocalyptic scene was in the San Francisco Bay Area one day, when people in all its cities woke up to a dusky orange sky. Lights that normally came on only at night remained lit throughout the morning. No direct rays from the sun penetrated the smoke mixed with fog – many solar panels never started producing electricity.

A photo of downtown San Francisco in early afternoon, showed dark streets with car headlights on, lights in buildings lit, and an orange sky.

All over the Bay Area people remarked on the eerie scene. It felt Biblical.

In over one month, five million acres have already burned in the three states.

The fires first erupted in California in August, and have burst out in Washington and Oregon in recent days.

Concerning California, an article in the New York Times said, “The crisis facing the nation’s most populous state is more than just an accumulation of individual catastrophes. It is also an example of something climate experts have long worried about, but which few expected to see so soon: a cascading effect, in which a series of disasters overlap, triggering or amplifying each other.

“ ‘You’re toppling dominoes in ways Americans haven’t imagined,’ said Roy Wright, who directed resilience programs for the Federal Emergency Management Agency until 2018 and grew up in Vacaville, Calif., near one of this year’s largest fires so far. ‘It’s apocalyptic.’

“The state’s simultaneous crises illustrate how the ripple effect works. A scorching summer led to dry conditions never before experienced. That aridity help make the season’s wildfires the biggest ever recorded. Six of the 20 largest wildfires in California’s history have occurred this year....

“The intensely hot wildfires are not only chasing thousands of people from their homes but causing dangerous chemicals to leach into drinking water [and into the smoke].

“Excessive heat warnings and suffocating smoky air have threatened the health of people already struggling during the pandemic. And the threat of more wildfires has led insurance companies to cancel homeowner policies and the state’s main utility to shut off power to tens of thousands of people.”

There is another effect to be added to this cascade. That is, global warming is causing hotter weather to creep north into new areas. That is what happened this year, when California conditions have now been established for the first time in Oregon and Washington.

These states were basically unprepared for the eruption of the wildfires there. Firefighter faced a new situation of rapidly moving fires. Officials had to rapidly come up with procedures for evacuating people their paths. The people themselves were unprepared.

Some in Oregon have refused to evacuate, believing rumors spread online by Trump supporters that “antifa” terrorists are setting the fires. They say they are staying with their guns ready to shoot these imaginary antifa arsonists.

Most of these fires in the west coast are occurring in high elevation areas. This has been the pattern in recent years in what some scientists have discerned as a first phase of the fire season, from June through September.

But the situation in Oregon has been different. Timothy Ingalsbee, a wildfire ecologist and former firefighter, now the director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology is based in Eugene, Oregon. He was interviewed September 14 on Democracy Now.

He said, “This past week, we’ve had over two dozen very large fires burning on the west side of the Cascades [mountains]. These have been explosive rates of growth, tens of thousands of acres, several miles per day.

“And it is natural for Oregon to have big fires in the mountains. What’s very freakish about these is to have these fires coming down the mountains, barreling down our valleys, marching right up to the doorsteps of major metropolitan areas like Portland and Eugene....

“What is really rare about this, there was a region wide east wind event. The winds came screaming from deserts on the east side of the mountains up over, barreled down these valleys and just propelled these flames.

“And though some scientists hesitate to attribute a single event to climate change, these are exactly the conditions predicted by climatologists. And where once they were rare, they will become much more frequent in the days ahead.”

Ingalsbee also noted “When these fires erupted in some cases the wind blew down power lines in the dark of night right on the edge of towns, and so people had no warning, and flames lapping at their walls, and they had to flee for their lives.

“The first crews to arrive there were not even able to engage the fire. They had to help people to evacuate. It wasn’t for a couple of days that firefighters were actually able to fight the fire.”

The situation in Oregon now is what we have seen in recent years in California — of fires being propelled by east winds coming from the deserts east of California, usually starting in October, in what has been characterized as a second wave of the fire season.

Beginning in 2017, there have been big fires of this type that have rapidly moved west, destroying

cities and towns with many deaths. If this pattern holds, then what we are seeing in Oregon will now begin to occur for the rest of the year in California.

This first fire season has seen unprecedented conflagrations already in the Pacific Coast, but this may be just a prelude to what's coming.

Some are beginning to call these wildfires "climate fires", while Trump continues to deny that climate change even exists. He is saying that the present fires are the result only of poor forest management by Democrats, denying the obvious.

Biden and other Democrats have attacked Trump for his climate change denial. But they support continued burning of fossil fuels. The Democratic governor of California does say that climate change is behind the fires. But he has approved over 7,000 drilling permits for oil and gas in the state this year.

Biden loudly proclaims that he is for fracking. He is against even the watered-down Green New Deal that was presented to Congress by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others, but was never taken up, including in the Democrat-controlled House.

There has been poor forest management that is a subordinate factor in the fires, but much of it has been the result of policies Trump supports like clear cutting forests, unbridled logging, and so forth. These policies have been going on for a long time, under both Democrats and Republicans.

Because of cutbacks in many social services by both parties, the number of firefighters is inadequate. They are thinly spread all along the coastal states, heroically battling all these fires that continue to spread.

Ingalsbee said, "A very important point, though, is no amount of firefighters, engines, tankers or whatever will be able to handle phenomenon like this. This is a climate-driven wildfire. Nature is far more powerful than us.

"And so, unless and until we get a handle on fossil fuel emissions, there's nothing we can do that will really prevent these kinds of events from happening."

Barry Sheppard
