

# Wildfires in US Pacific Northwest continue to burn

By James Blackwell  
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Wildfires have consumed more than one million acres in the Pacific Northwest with 23 large fires still uncontained. So far this year, a total of 3,382 fires have burned throughout the states of Oregon and Washington.

In Washington, the 472 square mile Okanogan Complex of wildfires, the largest fire in the state's history, grew 22 square miles in a single night, destroyed 154 structures, and cost the lives of three firefighters. This complex, ignited by lightning on August 21 near the town of Omak, Washington has burned nearly 600,000 acres. Sunday rains slowed the progress of the fires, but they still remain largely uncontained.

In Oregon, the 135 square mile Canyon Creek Complex fire, started by lightning on August 12, has burned through 102,000 acres in the Canyon Creek canyon, John Day Valley, and the pristine Strawberry Wilderness. With only 49 percent containment, the fire grew by more than 11,000 acres in one day. Already more than 89 structures have been destroyed, and the homes of some 900 residents in Prairie City, 15 miles east of John Day Valley, were threatened at one point. Over 759 personnel, including six National Guard units and volunteer firefighters battled the wildfire over the weekend.

In California 11 wildfires are still raging, with nearly 300,000 acres scarred. Since January 2015, there have been 4,743 fires—1,458 more than last year to date—over 1,562 more fires than the five-year average of 3,181, and more than twice the average acreage destroyed. In August, more than 10,000 firefighters battled 16 wildfires, 13,000 residents were ordered to evacuate, and 96 structures had been destroyed, according to CNN.

The deaths of three firefighters in Washington state

highlight the risks posed to fire crews, who may have inadequate training. Many of those fighting wildfires are seasonal workers. Many subcontractors and those from suburban fire departments are also being brought to the fire lines. In some cases National Guardsmen and active duty soldiers, who have no experience in fire fighting, have been pressed into service. Crews may work 14-days at a time for 16-hours a day engaged in intensely physical activity.

This year has been among the most destructive wildfire seasons in recent history, with drought gripping much of the West. In May, Washington Governor Jay Inslee declared a statewide drought emergency, saying “Although we have had average to above average precipitation this year, there has been significantly less snowpack due to higher than normal temperatures.” According to Washington State University's drought homepage, “this has affected water supplies for irrigation and stream flows that depend on melting snowpack.”

Jeremy Littell, lead research scientist at the Alaska Climate Science Center, told *The Seattle Times*, “regardless of what the projections are for climate change, we do have a fire issue. Climate change only makes it worse in most cases. Generally speaking, you expect more fire activity.”

Washington is not the only state with a drought emergency. California is also facing one of the most severe droughts on record, with Governor Jerry Brown declaring a State of Emergency in January, and directing state officials to take all necessary actions to prepare for water shortages. In Oregon drought conditions are increasingly dire and have begun to hit municipal water supplies.

Dave Peterson, a research biologist at the Pacific Wildland Fire Sciences Laboratory who has studied the

effect of climate change on fire, reported to the *Seattle Times* that he expects the total area burned by wildfire in the West to double or triple by midcentury. Moreover, the *Seattle Times* reports that, “experts say fires nationwide are growing larger and becoming more volatile, more people are living in fire-prone areas and the cost of suppressing fires continues to rise.”

Climate change is not the only consideration. The US Forest Service is anticipating a budget shortfall, and has begun transferring money from its various branches to support its diminishing fire suppression fund, reports *Wildfire Today*. The agency will, for the first time in its 110-year history, spend more than half of its budget to fight fires this year.

Florida State Forester Jim Karels, president of the National Association of State Foresters, told *Wildfire Today*, “the multitude of benefits that forests provide to the public—including clean air and water, recreation, forest products, and jobs—are at risk because of the broken federal wildfire funding system. It’s too late for congress to act to prevent transfers this fire season. But... must act soon to ensure this is the last time we rob resources to fund fire suppression at the expense of our nation’s forests’ long-term health.”

Commenting on the wildfires in Oregon to the Associated Press, US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack noted the rising cost of fighting wildfires. “14,000 homes in Oregon and Washington are currently at risk and the Forest Service is spending ten million a day for fire suppression in the region... In 1995, 16 percent of the Forest Service’s budget went toward fire suppression. Today, 52 percent of the agency’s budget is spent on fighting fires. In the next decade, if the trend continues, the agency estimates nearly 70 percent of its budget will go toward wildfire costs.” As of this writing, the US Forest Service has less than \$174 million left of its \$1 billion budget for fire suppression.

A rational approach to the problem of wildfires would allocate the necessary resources for preventative measures such as the regular thinning of brush and forest with prescribed fires. Instead the Forest Service is being starved for funds under conditions of drought compounded by the impact of climate change.

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