

Seven killed, hundreds of homes destroyed as Carr wildfire spreads across Northern California

By Alec Andersen
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Over the weekend, the death toll from the Carr fire, California's largest current wildfire, raging in the state's northern Shasta County near the city of Redding, climbed to seven as the fire more than doubled in size and containment efforts have yielded little progress.

The Carr fire, which over the weekend grew to become the state's largest, has destroyed 517 buildings, including at least 300 homes, and threatens an additional 5,000 homes in Redding and the surrounding area.

Two young children and an adult were confirmed dead Saturday after flames from the fire engulfed a home near Redding, located 120 miles south of the border with Oregon, late last week.

A neighbor reported five-year-old James Roberts and his four-year-old sister, Emily, missing on Friday along with their 70-year-old great-grandmother, Mary Bledsoe, after the wildfire burned through the family's house on the outskirts of Redding on Thursday. Nobody had seen nor heard from them after a frantic call from Mary to her husband, Ed Bledsoe, as the fire was closing in.

According to a fundraising web page set up by another local resident, the family did not believe that they were subject to an evacuation order. Ed Bledsoe had left to stock up on supplies Thursday when the fire struck. The elderly couple had cared for their great-grandchildren for years. On top of the anguish Bledsoe faces as a result of losing his family and home, the GoFundMe page tells readers that the property was rented and the couple did not have renter's insurance, meaning that Bledsoe has effectively been rendered homeless with little hope of reimbursement for the loss

of all of his belongings.

On Sunday, the Shasta County Sheriff's Office announced that two additional unidentified people were confirmed to have died in separate incidents, one of whom was discovered in the charred remains of their home, bringing to seven the number of lives claimed by the blaze, with at least seven people still missing. Several people have also been admitted to nearby hospitals with burns and respiratory complications.

These deaths followed those of two firefighters earlier in the week, including 81-year-old contract bulldozer operator, Don Ray Smith, who was working to clear brush and vegetation to contain the fire when his position was overtaken by the blaze, and Redding fire inspector Jeremy Stoke, for whom the details have not yet been released.

Redding, with a mostly working-class population approaching 92,000, is the governmental and commercial center of Shasta County. It was first built in 1868 as a railroad town during the California Gold Rush and experienced periods of relative prosperity as a result of nearby iron and copper deposits, as well as an abundance of lumber from the dense evergreen forests in the northern reaches of the Central Valley.

After the closure of the city's paper mills in the 1970s, however, industrial production ground to a halt and the economy today, like many deindustrialized rural communities in the United States, is dominated by the service and real estate sectors.

The Carr fire was sparked on July 23 by a vehicle experiencing mechanical failure while traveling on Route 299 outside of Redding. Over the subsequent week, temperatures as high as 113 degrees Fahrenheit combined with low humidity, high winds, and drought

conditions to facilitate the fire's rapid spread across the Sacramento River and in multiple directions. Temperatures are expected to remain around 100 degrees over the coming week as the humidity drops to between 10 and 15 percent, setting the stage for further expansion.

The heat of the wildfire has grown so intense that it has altered the weather of the surrounding area, creating powerful winds and fire vortices ("firenadoes") that can cause the fire to spread in several directions at once and make forecasting extremely difficult. Meteorologists told the *Los Angeles Times* that this rare weather phenomenon has been a key contributor to the fire's spread, more than natural atmospheric winds.

Between Friday evening and Saturday morning, the blaze doubled in size to 81,000 acres of land burned. As of Sunday, the area burned had increased further to 95,000 acres and the fire was only 17 percent contained. Some 38,000 residents have been ordered to evacuate the area, many of whom have been forced to proceed to hastily-constructed relief centers run by the Red Cross, United Way and other charities. These relief efforts have been chaotic, with evacuees reporting that one Red Cross shelter was full by 9:00 the morning after the evacuation order was issued, while the Red Cross subsequently announced that it had plenty of capacity to take in more evacuees at a different facility.

Over recent years, the Western United States has suffered a series of droughts that have increased both the frequency and severity of wildfires significantly, particularly on the coast. Carr is one of 17 wildfires raging across the state of California, which just emerged last year from a drought that began in 2011 and caused water levels to decline to crisis levels. Between October and June, the Shasta region experienced only about 55 percent of the average rainfall in prior years.

As temperatures continue to climb and precipitation becomes more erratic due to climate change, wildfires like the Carr are expected to become more frequent. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has been cutting funds from predictive modeling and other programs designed to improve the response to such events, while Democratic politicians make no mention of these issues that represent the difference between life and death for

workers in the United States and throughout the world.

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