

Renewed heat and lightning increase fire danger in California

By Rafael Azul
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Cooler weather and the arrival of more firefighters and equipment from other states helped to make some progress containing the storm of devastating wildfires which hit California over the last week. However, more heat, dry weather and thunderstorms are increasing the number of new wildfires in Northern California.

According to a Tuesday report by Cal-Fire, over 1.25 million acres (500,000 hectares) have burned in less than two weeks, equivalent to the size of the state of Delaware. So far, 140,000 residents have been ordered to evacuate from their homes.

Cal-Fire indicated that their preliminary assessment indicated 1,400 homes and other buildings have been destroyed, and that the final number could reach 3,000. The agency also considers some 30,000 buildings at risk of being destroyed by the Walbridge fire, burning in Napa, Sonoma and Lake counties, north of the Bay Area.

Seven people have been confirmed dead, and there is an active search for missing people, which could yield additional fatalities.

After the dry lightning storm that ignited fires in the areas surrounding the San Francisco Bay Area on August 15, and despite the limitations on the use of prison laborers due to coronavirus, firefighters managed this week to slowly control 29 percent of the Walbridge Fire in the wine region north of San Francisco; 15 percent of the LNU lightning complex Northeast of the Bay Area; 15 percent in the SEU lightning complex east of San Jose and the Silicon Valley; and 17 percent of the series of fires in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties (the CZU Lightning complex). Currently, 14,000 firefighters are battling the fires across the state.

Given the combined extension of these three fires, 1,200 square miles (3,100 square kilometers), there is

still a lot that must be done by firefighters, while at the same time confronting new outbreaks.

State authorities are warning that conditions are still very dangerous and have warned evacuees not to return to their homes until allowed to do so. Six residents who did return to their homes south of San Francisco had to be rescued from the flames. While some evacuees are returning to what is left of their homes, new groups are being given evacuation orders as fires break out across Northern California.

As of last count, there have been over 650 outbreaks since the beginning of the lightning storms. While the weather this week has been more favorable in terms of humidity, the latest forecast anticipates a warming and drying trend with temperature highs above 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 degrees Celsius).

On Tuesday, the National Weather Service issued a Red Flag Warning of more thunderstorms with potential lightning and no rain, increasing the danger of new wild fires in Northeastern California all the way down to the Lake Tahoe Basin in Central California near the Nevada border. Over 13,000 lightning strikes have occurred since August 15, and several hundred in the last few days have ignited new fires.

On Wednesday fires erupted along Highway 16 in Yolo County, west of Sacramento, the state's capital. Evacuations were ordered in Winters near the University of California, Davis.

The Yolo County and LNU fires are impacting air quality in the greater Sacramento area. Air Quality Index readings of 150 to 200, considered unhealthy for the general population—not just “sensitive groups,” such as victims of the coronavirus or people with asthma and other respiratory ailments—are expected for the entire region through this weekend.

In addition to the wildfires in California, massive

fires are also taking place across the world.

According to just released satellite information by NASA's Fire Information Resource Management System (FIRMS), extensive wildfires are taking place in the Amazon region of Brazil, in Argentina, and in southern Africa. Brazilian authorities reported on August 20 9,507 new fires, mostly in the Amazon River basin. In Argentina, the region bordering on the Paraná River delta is also on fire, severely affecting the air quality of cities along the southern end of the river, including Buenos Aires. In both cases, landowners have set the forests on fire, to clear land for cattle and soybean production.

As always, what is typically described as natural phenomena—fires, floods, tornados, hurricanes and earthquakes—evinces a lot more about the realities of life under capitalism. In California, like the rest of the world, millions of people, working on a daily basis and producing unprecedented levels of global wealth, will be cut out of the resources necessary to address the devastating consequences of the latest round of fires. While the political elite pathetically issues empty promises, especially in an election year, the complicit media may show slivers of social reality for a moment, but only until the smoke has dissipated. Then, those suffering the disastrous consequences will be forgotten and the next round of “natural phenomena” will take another toll.

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