

West Coast fires and evacuations expected to fuel the spread of COVID-19

By Kevin Martinez
16 September 2020

At least 87 fires are still burning in 11 states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. In Oregon, at least 22 people are missing because of the wildfires, which have claimed 10 people in the state, including a 13-year-old and his grandmother. Officials fear more deaths will be confirmed in the coming days and have established a mobile medical examiner facility, essentially a mobile morgue, in Linn County east of Corvallis. A child was killed also in Washington state.

In California, at least 24 people have died in the wildfires. The North Complex Fire alone has taken 15 lives, destroyed 723 structures and burned more than 260,000 acres across four counties. It is only 39 percent contained.

Seven victims of the North Complex Fire have been identified by the Butte County Sheriff's Office, ranging in age from 16 to 70.

The August Complex Fire, which started last month, has burned more than 755,000 acres across Mendocino and Humboldt counties and is only 39 percent contained.

The Creek Fire in Fresno County has now burned more than 220,000 acres and is 16 percent contained. The Dolan Fire, south of Big Sur, is only 40 percent contained and has burned almost 120,000 acres.

Across Oregon and Washington, 28 large fires have burned over 1.5 million acres. The Beachie Creek Fire, east of Salem, reported no new growth from the previous day as officials are cautiously optimistic that expected precipitation can help firefighting efforts.

Washington Governor Jay Inslee said that "virtually the entire state is covered by a cloud of smoke that's unbelievably irritating, downright unhealthy and dangerous." Many parts of the West Coast continue to have some of the worst air quality in the world,

according to the air quality group IQAir. The fires are now so widespread that parts of the East Coast, including New York City and Washington, D.C., are now registering smoke from the infernos.

There are now nine major wildfires burning across Washington state, with the two largest, the Pearl Hill and Cold Springs fires, burning more than 412,500 acres, according to the Washington Department of Natural Resources.

As wildfires continue to spread throughout the Western United States, health officials are warning that COVID-19 will also infect evacuees at shelters and evacuations sites that are now dealing with two public health emergencies.

Because the physical ailments associated with smoke inhalation are so similar to the symptoms associated with the virus, there is a growing concern that hospitals may be inundated with people suffering from both. Even worse, those at risk of contracting COVID-19 at an emergency shelter may forgo evacuating at all.

Karl Kim, executive director of the National Disaster Preparedness Training Center, which trains first responders, told *U.S. News and World Report*, "People are scrambling right now to figure out how this affects the guidance and messaging and so forth." He also said that the shelters' relationship to public health is an "unusually important and under-researched topic."

As families and groups evacuate from one location to another, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell to what extent the group shelters are fueling the pandemic.

"Contact tracing is really critical during a pandemic, and just because there's a wildfire, all of the needs associated with contact tracing don't just go away," Kim said. "I think it's more complicated because of the urgent nature of the evacuation. We don't have

good systems for this; nonetheless, we need to do that tracking. That's the ongoing public health challenge.”

Organizations like the American Red Cross are requiring evacuees to wear masks and stay six feet apart, but these rules are becoming increasingly difficult to enforce in disaster zones and crowded shelters.

The Oregon State Fairgrounds in the state capital Salem saw maskless groups of evacuees gather in the parking lot and barn over the weekend. Signs were posted outside the exposition center with health and safety guidelines regarding both the fires and the pandemic. Volunteers reminded everyone inside to wear masks.

Already some 6,300 people are in emergency Red Cross shelters and hotels but as many as 50,000 potential evacuees may join them before the fires are brought under control, according to Brad Kieserman, vice president of disaster operations and logistics for the American Red Cross.

Kieserman told the media that normally during an emergency shelter situation, community groups and charities gather evacuees into school gymnasiums and meeting halls and food is provided in buffet lines. The pandemic, however, has forced shelters to adopt new approaches that minimize the risk of disease transmission.

“Noncongregate shelters is a new pandemic thing,” Kieserman said, “The last thing we want to have happen is people to remain in the path of a wildfire or hurricane because they think it's safer to do than risk a shelter.”

Red Cross teams are reported to be cleaning and disinfecting regularly as well as checking staffers and evacuees for any signs of sickness. Those who are infected are taken to special isolation centers, and if possible are sent to hotels instead of group shelters. Box lunches are being distributed in lieu of buffet lines.

Group shelters in Central California are reportedly using plastic pipes with clear shower curtains to separate people in evacuation centers while still allowing them to see outside from their isolated areas. According to the Red Cross, more than 1,200 people fleeing the Creek Fire are staying at 30 hotels, while the rest stay at group shelters.

In Oregon, officials have moved beyond hosting group shelters at the usual churches, schools, and

community buildings to include malls, golf courses, and other businesses to accommodate those staying in their cars or recreational vehicles.

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