

# United States - California Wildfires Fanned by Global Warming

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**The wildfires north of San Francisco, in California's wine country, exploded in the night of October 8-9, whipped by high, dry and hot winds. They have wreaked unprecedented damage.**

As I write this a week and a half later, these fires still burn. At least 41 people have been killed – a number that will surely rise as burnt-out neighborhoods are searched for bodies. While the fires started in hilly wooded areas, they moved into towns and cities, laying waste to over 5,700 homes and other structures and burned through 213,000 acres, making these the most damaging (by many times over) fire storms in California since records were first kept.

Over 100,000 people were evacuated, many still displaced. Expect higher prices for California wines in the next years, as many vineyards were destroyed.

Fire storms happen when smaller separate fires merge into a single large fire, which draws winds into them, and are very hot. At times the fires spread so quickly that firefighters had to flee, running away as fast as they could. Many of the deaths happened when people were unable to evacuate in time.

Depending on wind direction, for many days thick, toxic smoke extended for a hundred miles south to San Francisco and beyond. Where I live, south and east of SF, the smell was so strong one day that upon waking I first thought my house was burning, until I went outside and saw the smoke was everywhere.

All the household chemicals and other materials produced highly toxic ashes when burned. People returning to search through the debris to see if anything could be salvaged are in danger of being poisoned. Dr. Karen Relucio, chief medical officer in Napa County, one of the hardest hit places, said in an interview, "Just think of all the hazardous materials in your house, the chemicals, pesticides, propane, gasoline, plastic and paint. It concentrates in the ash, and it's toxic." She warned people away from the ashes and declared a public emergency in the county, as have other burned out areas.

Long after the fires are extinguished, there will have to be a major effort to clean up all the dangerous toxic ash.

There is a direct link between these fires and global warming. The five preceding years saw a once-in-500 year drought in California, which scientists were able to link to increased temperatures resulting from climate change. During this drought, over one hundred million trees died, providing a huge reservoir of fuel for this year's fires.

California has what meteorologists call a Mediterranean climate, with usually wet winters and dry spring through fall months. During the five-year drought, the wet seasons were unusually short with little precipitation, while the dry seasons were unusually long and hot. During our last winter, there

were greater than normal rains and snows, seeming to break the drought. It remains to be seen whether this year's upcoming wet season repeats last year's.

In any case, once the rains stopped, California was in the grip of a record-breaking season of high temperatures that dried everything out. An example was one day this summer that saw temperatures in San Francisco reaching 106 degrees F. (41 degrees C.) This too broke a record for the city going back to when records were first kept. San Francisco's summers are usually cool and foggy. (Mark Twain once quipped that the coldest winter he ever experienced was summer in San Francisco.)

California state Fire Chief Ken Pimlott said, "We are still impacted by five years of drought. With the significant rain that we had last winter, those effects are gone of that moisture, and we are literally looking at explosive vegetation. These fires are burning actively during the day and night, when one would expect a fire to subside. And make no mistake: this is a serious, critical, catastrophic event."

An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* was headlined, "The climate-change fire alarm from Northern California."

"We don't yet know what started the fires... but we have a good idea of what made them so destructive," the editorial said. "This is not just bad luck. Coming on the heels of other large-scale natural disasters - Houston inundated by a slow-moving tropical storm, swaths of Florida and the Caribbean ripped to shreds by a monster hurricane, much of Puerto Rico leveled by an equally powerful hurricane, a handful of Western states swept by massive fires that burned up millions of acres - one can't help but see a disturbing pattern emerge. Those superstorms that scientists warned would result from climate change? They are here. The day of reckoning isn't in the future. It is now."

The words "record breaking" have become commonplace: There have been 18 tropical storms this year so far in the Atlantic originating off the coast of Africa, a record. And 10 of these have become hurricanes - another record - many the strongest ever seen, as the *LA Times* noted. One even swerved north to hit Ireland.

Daniel Swain, climate scientist at the University of California in Los Angeles, said, "The changes in climate that we're experiencing are largely due to the human emission of greenhouse gasses [due to the extraction, refining and burning of fossil fuels]. And we expect warming to continue for as long as we continue to emit those greenhouse gases.... If we chose to reduce and eventually eliminate our greenhouse gas emissions, we will avert much of the warming, much of the increased risk of extreme events like wildfires."

However, we are moving in the opposite direction, with the burning of fossil fuels increasing not decreasing worldwide, and in the U.S. To top it off, the present administration in Washington, from Trump on down is populated by climate change deniers, bent on burning more and more coal, oil and natural gas (methane, a powerful greenhouse gas even before it's burned), and shipping these also to the rest of the world.

Under pressure from the administration on TV stations, meteorologists when reporting on all of this extreme weather almost never use the words "global warming" and "climate change."

Expect more of the worst.

**Barry Sheppard**

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As was the case in Houston after hurricane Harvey flooded the streets and undocumented immigrants, fearing to be rounded up by the Immigration Enforcement Agency (ICE), avoided the government shelters that were set up, most of the 20,000 undocumented immigrants who fled the fires in the wine country have done likewise. Many of these immigrants labor in the vineyards.

A large number fled to the beaches on the Pacific Ocean, where they set up camps or slept in their cars. Others have gone to shelters set up by churches or others, to avoid federal agents.

On October 18, Thomas Homan, the acting director of ICE, blamed the sheriff of Sonoma County and the county government, another hard hit area, for allowing immigrants in. Homan accused the county of being a “non-cooperative jurisdiction” – that is non-cooperative with ICE raids – that “has left their community vulnerable to dangerous individuals and preventable crimes.”

The sheriff fired back, calling ICE’s statements inaccurate, inflammatory and damaging, and said, “ICE attacked the Sheriff’s Office in the midst of the largest natural disaster this county every experienced – I hope to end this senseless public confrontation with these facts so that I may focus of the fire recovery.”

The ICE acting director picked up on a charge by Steve Bannon’s white nationalist Breitbart news that an undocumented immigrant has set the fires. The sheriff refuted that charge, too.

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