

Hard to see, hard to breathe: US West struggles with smoke

August 20 2018, by Sally Ho And Gillian Flaccus



A man twirls a young child on a waterfront park as downtown Seattle disappears in a smoky haze behind, Sunday, Aug. 19, 2018. Poor air quality will be common across parts of the Pacific Northwest this week as winds push smoke from surrounding wildfires into the region, forecasters and regulators said. Air quality alerts are in effect for much of Washington state through Wednesday, according to the National Weather Service. The smoke is because of wildfires in British Columbia and the Cascade Mountains, according to the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson)

Smoke from wildfires clogged the sky across the U.S. West, blotting out

mountains and city skylines from Oregon to Colorado, delaying flights and forcing authorities to tell even healthy adults in the Seattle area to stay indoors.

As large cities dealt with unhealthy air for a second summer in a row, experts warned that it could become more common as the American West faces larger and more destructive wildfires because of heat and drought blamed on climate change. Officials also must prioritize resources during the longer firefighting season, so some blazes may be allowed to burn in unpopulated areas.

Seattle's Space Needle was swathed in haze, and it was impossible to see nearby mountains. Portland, Oregon, residents who were up early saw a blood-red sun shrouded in smoke and huffed their way through another day of polluted air. Portland Public Schools suspended all outdoor sports practices.

Thick smoke in Denver blocked the view of some of Colorado's famous mountains and prompted an air quality health advisory for the northeastern quarter of the state.

The smoky pollution, even in Idaho and Colorado, came from wildfires in British Columbia and the Northwest's Cascade Mountains, clouding a season that many spend outdoors.

Portland resident Zach Simon supervised a group of children in a summer biking camp who paused at a huge water fountain by the Willamette River, where gray, smoky haze obscured a view of Mount Hood.



The sun is seen through smoky air as it sets, Sunday, Aug. 19, 2018, behind the Narrows Bridge in Tacoma, Wash. Poor air quality will be common across parts of the Pacific Northwest this week as winds push smoke from surrounding wildfires into the region, forecasters and regulators said, and air quality alerts are in effect for much of Washington state through Wednesday. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

Simon said he won't let the kids ride as far or take part in as many running games like tag while the air quality is bad.

"I went biking yesterday, and I really felt it in my lungs, and I was really headachy and like, lethargic," Simon said Monday. "Today, biking, you can see the whole city in haze and you can't see the skyline."

One of Colin Shor's favorite things about working in the Denver area is the view of the high peaks to the west. But that was all but gone Monday.

"Not being able to see the mountains is kind of disappointing, kind of sad," he said.



The sun is seen through smoky air as it sets Sunday, Aug. 19, 2018, behind the Narrows Bridge in Tacoma, Wash. Poor air quality will be common across parts of the Pacific Northwest this week as winds push smoke from surrounding wildfires into the region, forecasters and regulators said, and air quality alerts are in effect for much of Washington state through Wednesday. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

Forest fires are common, but typical Seattle-area weather pushes it out of the way quickly. The latest round of prolonged smoke happened as hot temperatures and high pressure collided, said Andrew Wineke, a spokesman for the state Ecology Department's air quality program.

It's a rare occurrence that also happened last year, raising concerns for many locals that it may become normal during wildfire season. Wineke said climate change is expected to contribute to many more fires.

"The trend is clear. You see the number of forest fires increasing, and so there's going to be wildfires," Wineke said. "There's going to be smoke. It's going to be somewhere."

The Federal Aviation Administration said airplanes bound for the Sea-Tac International Airport, Seattle's main airport, may be delayed because of low visibility.



A smoky haze obstructs the skyscrapers and Rocky Mountains that usually can be seen as a backdrop to the city as a couple sits near the lake in City Park Monday, Aug. 20, 2018, in Denver. Smoke from the countless wildfires burning in western Canada as well as the American West has forced the issuance of air quality alerts across the region. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski)

In Spokane, air quality slipped into the "hazardous" range. Thick haze

hung over Washington's second-largest city, forcing vehicles to turn on their headlights during the morning commute.

The air quality was so bad that everyone, regardless of physical condition or age, will likely be affected, according to the Spokane Regional Clean Air Agency.

In California, wind blew smoke from several wildfires into the San Francisco Bay Area, where haze led authorities to issue an air quality advisory through Tuesday. They suggested people avoid driving to limit additional pollutants in the air and advised those with health problems to reduce time outdoors.

Health officials say signs of smoke-related health symptoms include coughing, scratchy throat, irritated sinuses, headaches, stinging eyes and runny nose. Those with heart disease may experience chest pain, irregular heartbeats, shortness of breath and fatigue.



A smoky haze envelopes the skyscrapers and Rocky Mountains that usually can be seen as a backdrop to the city from a high-rise building Monday, Aug. 20, 2018, in Denver. Smoke from the countless wildfires burning in western Canada as well as the American West has forced the issuance of air quality alerts across the region. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski)

Patients at Denver's National Jewish Health, a respiratory hospital, were reporting worsening symptoms, hospital spokesman Adam Dormuth said.

In Portland, six tourists from Lincoln, Nebraska, posed for a photo in front of the Willamette River with the usual Mount Hood backdrop shrouded in haze. The group of siblings and friends rented an RV and drove in to visit a sister who recently moved to the area.

"We are disappointed that we can't see the mountains and the whole city, because our relatives live here and tell us how pretty it is, and we're missing it," Bev Harris said. "We're from tornado alley, and we don't have wildfires. It's a different experience."

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