

California fires spread, fouling air and spurring evacuations

August 21 2020, by Jocelyne Zablitz



An aircraft drops fire retardant on a ridge during the Walbridge fire, part of the larger LNU Lightning Complex fire, as flames continue to spread in Healdsburg, California on August 20, 2020

Thick smoke blanketed large areas of central and northern California on Friday as more people fled some of the biggest fires in the state's history which have raged largely uncontrolled through the week.

The largest group of fires, dubbed the LNU Lightning Complex, had scorched nearly 220,000 acres (89,000 hectares) by Friday morning and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of residents.

Some of the fires in that complex—described as the ninth largest in the state's history—threatened wineries in the famed Napa and Sonoma regions which are still reeling from similar deadly blazes in recent years.

Officials said five deaths have been linked to the fires, which were ignited earlier in the week by lightning strikes.

Four bodies were recovered on Thursday, including three from a burned house in a rural area of Napa County.

Firefighters have struggled to contain the flames fed by a scorching heat wave and low humidity.

In all, fire crews are battling more than 300 fires throughout the state including more than two dozen considered major.

Tens of thousands have evacuated, with many struggling to find shelter and hesitating to go to centers set up by authorities because of coronavirus risks.

Some in San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties opted to sleep in trailers in [parking lots](#) or on beaches along the Pacific Ocean.



People watch the Walbridge fire, part of the larger LNU Lightning Complex fire, from a vineyard in Healdsburg, California on August 20, 2020

Tourists in the area were urged to leave hotels or vacation rentals to free up space for people fleeing the blazes.

Governor Gavin Newsom highlighted the crisis in a pre-taped speech to the Democratic National Convention on Thursday evening, saying the fires were directly linked to climate change.

'Climate change is real'

"Climate change is real," he said. "If you are in denial about [climate](#)

[change](#), come to California."

Newsom also took aim at President Donald Trump, who has criticized the state for its handling of the fires and threatened to withhold funding if it doesn't "clean the forests."

"Just today, the president of the United States threatened the state of California — 40 million Americans that happen to live here in the state of California—to defund our efforts on wildfire suppression, because he said we hadn't raked enough leaves," Newsom said. "Can't make that up."

Many of the fires are burning in unpopulated areas and have chewed through some 771,000 acres overall.



Fire retardant hangs in the air in Healdsburg, California

The smell of smoke lingered in San Francisco and other regions for the third consecutive day on Friday, with authorities urging people to stay indoors.

"The many [fire](#) complexes burning around the Bay Area and Central Coast will keep skies hazy and smoky, at least in the short term," the National Weather Service said.

Authorities in the Bay Area, which encompasses seven counties, said an air quality alert was in effect through Sunday.

Authorities have said the fires—grouped together and identified through three-letter monikers because of the high number of blazes across many counties—were caused by nearly 11,000 lightning strikes that hit the northern half of the state as it bakes under historic high temperatures, including a record of 130 degrees Fahrenheit (54.4 degrees Celsius) in Death Valley.

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Citation: California fires spread, fouling air and spurring evacuations (2020, August 21) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-08-california-fouling-air-spurring-evacuations.html>

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