

Smoke chokes West Coast as wildfire deaths keep climbing

September 13 2020, by Andrew Selsky and Lindsay Whitehurst



A fire engine from the Idanha-Detroit Rural Fire Protection District sits on Detroit Avenue Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, in Detroit, Ore. The engine was destroyed on Wednesday when the Lionshead Fire over-ran the resort community of Detroit, Ore., merging with the Beachie Creek Fire. Only the post office and a market survived the fire in the town's business district. (Mark Ylen/Albany Democrat-Herald via AP)

Wildfire smoke that posed a health hazard to millions choked the West Coast on Saturday as firefighters battled deadly blazes that obliterated some towns and displaced tens of thousands of people, the latest in a

series of calamities this year.

For people already enduring the coronavirus pandemic, the resulting economic fallout and political tensions evident in the Black Lives Matter protests and far-right counter protests, the fires added a new layer of misery.

"What's next? You have the protests, coronavirus pandemic, now the wildfires. What else can go wrong?" lamented Danielle Oliver, 40, of Happy Valley, southeast of Portland.

The death toll from the fires in California, Oregon and Washington stood at 31 and was expected to rise sharply. Most of the fatalities were in California and Oregon.

Oregon's emergency management director said officials were preparing for a possible "mass fatality event" if many more bodies turn up in the ash. And the state [fire](#) marshal resigned after abruptly being placed on administrative leave. The state police superintendent said the crisis demanded an urgent response that required a leadership change.

Oliver has an autoimmune disorder that makes her vulnerable to wildfire smoke, so she agreed to evacuate. She was nervous about going to a shelter because of the virus, but sleeping in a car with her husband, 15-year-daughter, two dogs and a cat was not a viable option.



Oregon Governor Kate Brown toured the Oregon State Fairgrounds in Salem, Ore., Saturday afternoon, Sept. 12, 2020, where she spoke with volunteers and evacuees. Brown also toured the animal facility where evacuated animals are being kept. Fires along Oregon's Cascade Range grew Saturday, but at a slower rate than earlier in the week. (Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian via AP, Pool)

The temperature checks and social distancing at the American Red Cross shelter helped put her mind at ease. Now the family waits, hoping their house will survive. She has previously experienced homelessness.

"I'm tired. I'm tired of starting all over. Getting everything, working for everything, then losing everything," she said.

Those who still had homes were not safe in them. A half-million Oregonians were under evacuation warnings or orders to leave. With air contamination levels at historic highs, people stuffed towels under door jambs to keep smoke out. Some even wore N95 masks in their own homes.

Some communities resembled the bombed-out cities of Europe after World War II, with buildings reduced to charred rubble piled atop blackened earth. Residents either managed to flee as the flames closed in, or perished.



George Coble walks through what remains of a home on his property destroyed by a wildfire Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Mill City, Ore. (AP Photo/John Locher)

Millicent Catarancuic's body was found near a car on her 5-acre property in Berry Creek, California. The flames came so quickly she did not have time to get out.

On Tuesday, she packed several of her dogs and cats in the car but later called her daughter to say she decided to stay. Firefighters had made progress battling the blaze. The wind was calm. The flames still seemed far away. Then they rushed onto the property.

"I feel like, maybe when they passed, they had an army of cats and dogs with her to help her through it," said her daughter, Holly Catarancuic.

In Oregon alone, more than 40,000 people have been evacuated and about 500,000 are in different levels of evacuation zones, Gov. Kate Brown said.

Fires along Oregon's Cascade Range grew Saturday, but at a slower rate than earlier in the week, when strong easterly winds acted like a bellows, pushing two [large fires](#)—the Beachie Creek Fire and the Riverside Fire—toward each other and the state's major population centers, including Portland's southeastern suburbs.



A man stops on his bike along the Willamette River as smoke from wildfires partially obscures the Tilikum Crossing Bridge, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Portland, Ore. (AP Photo/John Locher)

Fire managers did get a spot of good news: Higher humidity slowed the flames considerably.

In California, a total of 28 active major fires have burned 4,375 square miles, and 16,000 firefighters are trying to suppress the flames, Cal Fire Assistant Deputy Director Daniel Berlant said. Large wildfires continued to burn in northeastern Washington state too.

In all, 22 people have died in California since wildfires began breaking out across the state in mid-August.

President Donald Trump will visit California on Monday for a briefing on the West Coast fires, the White House announced.

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and the governors of California, Oregon and Washington state—all Democrats—have said the fires are a consequence of global warming.

"We absolutely must act now to avoid a future defined by an unending barrage of tragedies like the one American families are enduring across the West today," Biden said.



A person rides a bike along the Willamette River as smoke from wildfires partially obscures the Tilikum Crossing Bridge, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Portland, Ore. (AP Photo/John Locher)

The same smoke that painted California skies orange also helped crews corral the state's deadliest blaze of the year by blocking the sun, reducing temperatures and raising humidity, officials said.

Smoke created cooler conditions in Oregon too, but it was also blamed for making the dirtiest air in at least 35 years in some places. The air quality index reading Saturday morning in Salem, the state capital, was 512.

The scale normally goes from zero to 500.

"Above 500 is literally off the charts," said Laura Gleim, a spokesperson for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

Because past air quality was rarely so poor, the government's yardstick for measuring it capped out at 500, Gleim said. The department started monitoring in 1985.

The weather conditions that led up to the fires and fed the flames were likely a once-in-a-generation event, said Greg Jones, a professor and research climatologist at Linfield University in McMinnville, Oregon.



George Coble carries a bucket of water to put out a tree still smoldering on his property destroyed by a wildfire Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Mill City, Ore. (AP Photo/John Locher)

A large high-pressure area stretching from the desert Southwest to Alaska brought strong winds from the east toward the West Coast, reducing relative humidity to as low as 8% and bringing desert-like conditions, even to the coast, Jones said.

Instead of the offshore flows that the Pacific Northwest normally enjoys, the strong easterly winds pushed fires down the western slopes of the Cascade Range.

It isn't clear if global warming caused the conditions, Jones said, but a

warmer world can increase the likelihood of extreme events and contribute to their severity.

The smoke in Portland filled the air with an acrid metallic scent like dull pennies. It was so thick that Ashley Kreitzer could not see the road when she headed out to work as a ride-hailing driver.

"I couldn't even see five feet ahead of me," she said. "I was panicking, I didn't even know if I wanted to go out."



George Coble douses a still smoldering tree at his property destroyed by a wildfire Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Mill City, Ore. (AP Photo/John Locher)



Smoke from wildfires fills the sky over Pasadena, Calif., in this view looking east down Colorado Boulevard on Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020. The air was categorized as unhealthy by the South Coast Air Quality Management District. The National Weather Service said there were widespread smoke layers across the region. (AP Photo/John Antczak)



Downtown Los Angeles is seen through the smoke from the Bobcat and the El Dorado fires, Friday, Sept. 11, 2020. (Keith Birmingham/The Orange County Register via AP)



Cat food and water are seen as residents try to find lost pets who went missing during wildfires in Talent, Ore., Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, as destructive wildfires devastate the region. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein)



Lexi Sovllios from Talent, Ore., holds her dogs as she looks at the ruins of her burned house in Talent on Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, as destructive wildfires devastate the region. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein)



Jackson County District 5 firefighter Captain Aaron Bustard works on a smoldering fire in a burned neighborhood in Talent, Ore., Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, as destructive wildfires devastate the region. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein)



Ellie Owens, 8, from Grants Pass, Ore., looks at fire damage Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, as destructive wildfires devastate the region in Talent, Ore. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein)



A burned residence is seen as destructive wildfires devastate the region on Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, in Talent, Ore. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein)



Smoke fills the area around the Oak Park Motel Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, in Gates, Ore. The motel, owned by Ron and Belinda Evans, was one of several business destroyed by the Beachie Creek Fire. (Mark Ylen/Albany Democrat-Herald via AP)



Jackson County District 5 firefighter Captain Aaron Bustard, right, and Andy Buckingham work on a smoldering fire in a burned neighborhood as destructive wildfires devastate the region on Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, in Talent, Ore. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein)



Smoke fills the air in the area of Detroit, Ore., on the main street of Detroit Avenue Friday, Sept. 11, 2020. Tuesday in this area stood a vacant hardware store, city hall, fire department and sheriff's substation. On Wednesday fire swept down a canyon destroying the town. (Mark Ylen/Albany Democrat-Herald via AP)



Firefighters monitor a controlled burn along Nacimiento-Fergusson Road to help contain the Dolan Fire near Big Sur, Calif., Friday, Sept. 11, 2020. (AP Photo/Nic Coury)



A trike that was in a small park along Detroit Avenue still stands near the Lake Detroit Market, Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, in Detroit, Ore. Smoke that poses a health hazard to millions is blanketing the West Coast as firefighters battle deadly wildfires that obliterated some towns and created tens of thousands of refugees. (Mark Ylen/Albany Democrat-Herald via AP)



Firefighters light a controlled burn along Nacimiento-Fergusson Road to help contain the Dolan Fire near Big Sur, Calif., Friday, Sept. 11, 2020. (AP Photo/Nic Coury)



Only the sign remains in front of the Detroit Community Church Friday, Sept. 11, 2020, in Detroit, Ore. The church along with the majority of businesses and homes in the resort community of Detroit, were destroyed when the Lionshead Fire swept through the community on Wednesday. (Mark Ylen/Albany Democrat-Herald via AP)



Brenda Pearson, left, Marion County's Emergency Management field branch manager, greets Oregon Governor Kate Brown, second right, before touring her through sections of the Oregon State Fairgrounds in Salem, Ore., Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, where she spoke with volunteers and evacuees of the wildfires. Brown also met privately with county commissioners and other officials. In Oregon alone, more than 40,000 people have been evacuated and about 500,000 are in different levels of evacuation zones, Gov. Brown said. (Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian via AP, Pool)



Oregon Governor Kate Brown toured the Oregon State Fairgrounds in Salem, Ore., Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, where she spoke with volunteers and evacuees. Brown also toured the animal facility where evacuated animals are being kept. Fires along Oregon's Cascade Range grew Saturday, but at a slower rate than earlier in the week, when strong easterly winds pushed two large fires, the Beachie Creek Fire and the Riverside Fire, toward each other and the state's major population centers, including Portland's southeastern suburbs. (Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian via AP, Pool)



Erik Tucker pours water on a smoldering stump in an area around his home burned by the Beachie Creek Fire, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Lyons, Ore. Tucker lost a shed but his home was intact. (AP Photo/John Locher)



Erik Tucker carries a bucket of water to put out hot spots in an area around his home burned by the Beachie Creek Fire, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Lyons, Ore. Tucker lost a shed but his home was intact. (AP Photo/John Locher)



Boats are partially obscured by smoke from a wildfire at a marina on Detroit Lake burned by the Beachie Creek Fire, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Detroit, Ore. (AP Photo/John Locher)



A sign advises to social distance at a marina building on Detroit Lake burned by the Beachie Creek Fire, Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Detroit, Ore. (AP Photo/John Locher)



An injured cat named Prince is being treated for third degree burns on his paws, stomach and face by technician assistant Kaity Kelsey, left. and Vet assistant Kayla Weisz, right, both from Medford at the Southern Oregon Veterinary Specialty Center (SOVSC) which is a 24/7 hospital dealing with rescued animals from the destructive wildfires devastating the region on Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020 in Central Point, Ore. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein)



A burned cat temporarily named Chestnut is seen recovering from her injuries at the Southern Oregon Veterinary Specialty Center (SOVSC) which is a 24/7 hospital dealing with rescued animals from the destructive wildfires devastating the region on Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020 in Central Point, Ore. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein)



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An injured 8 week old kitten with facial burns is being treated at the Southern Oregon Veterinary Specialty Center (SOVSC) which is a 24/7 hospital dealing with rescued animals from the destructive wildfires devastating the region on Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020 in Central Point, Ore. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein)

George Coble had no home to return to. He came with some of his employees Saturday to a wasteland of charred tree trunks just outside Mill City, Oregon. Coble lost everything: his fence-and-post business, five houses in a family compound and vintage cars, including a 1967 Mustang.

The family—three generations that lived in the compound—evacuated with seven people, three horses, five dogs and a cat.

"We'll just keep working and keep your head up and thank God everybody got out," Coble said. "There are other people that lost their family. Just be thankful for what you did get out with."

Erik Tucker spent the day hauling buckets of water through what remained of his neighborhood to douse hot spots smoldering in tree trunks five days after the wildfire tore through the area.

Tucker, who lives in Lyons, Oregon, had expected the worst but found his family's home still standing while homes just down the street were gone. He was coated in ash and smudged with charcoal.

"No power, debris everywhere, smoke, can't breathe," he said.

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