

Western wildfire smoke causes East Coast haze, vivid sunsets

September 17 2020, by Susan Montoya Bryan



This photo taken at sunrise from Surf City on Long Beach Island in New Jersey shows the sun shrouded in smoke and brown haze Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020. The smoke from dozens of wildfires in the western United States is stretching clear across the country—and even pushing into Mexico, Canada and Europe. While the dangerous plumes are forcing people inside along the West Coast, residents thousands of miles away in the East are seeing unusually hazy skies and remarkable sunsets. (Elizabeth Laird via AP)

The smoke from dozens of wildfires in the western United States is stretching clear across the country—and even pushing into Mexico, Canada and Europe. While the dangerous plumes are forcing people inside along the West Coast, residents thousands of miles away in the East are seeing unusually hazy skies and remarkable sunsets.

The wildfires racing across tinder-dry landscape in California, Idaho, Oregon and Washington are extraordinary, but the long reach of their smoke isn't unprecedented. While there are only small pockets in the southeastern U.S. that are haze free, experts say the smoke poses less of a health concern for those who are farther away.

The sun was transformed into a perfect orange orb as it set over New York City on Tuesday. Photographs of it sinking behind the skyline and glinting through tree leaves flooded social media. On Wednesday, New Jersey residents described a yellow tinge to the overcast skies, and weather forecasters were kept busy explaining the phenomenon and making predictions as to how long the conditions would last.

On the opposite coast, air quality conditions were among some of the worst ever recorded. Smoke cloaked the Golden Gate Bridge and left Portland and Seattle in an ashy fog, as crews have exhausted themselves trying to keep the flames from consuming more homes and even wider swaths of forest.



Traffic flows on Townline Road as a hazy sun sets in Vernon Hills, Ill., Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020. The smoke from dozens of wildfires in the western United States has now blanket much of the county along with parts of Mexico and Canada, as residents thousands of miles away on the East Coast are being treated to unusually hazy skies and remarkable sunsets. (John Starks/Daily Herald via AP)

Satellite images showed that smoke from the wildfires has traveled almost 5,000 miles (8,000 kilometers) to Britain and other parts of northern Europe, scientists said Wednesday.

The current weather system, which favors a westerly wind across the higher levels of the atmosphere, is to blame for the reach of the smoke,

experts explained.

"We always seem, at times, to get the right combination of enough smoke and the upper level jet stream to line up to bring that across the country, so we're just seeing this again," said Matt Solum with the National Weather Service's regional operations center in Salt Lake City, Utah. "It's definitely not the first time this has happened."

There could be some easing of the haze this weekend as a storm system is expected to move into the Pacific Northwest and could affect the conditions that helped the smoke travel across the country. But Solum said there's always a chance for more smoke and haze to shift around.



A person crosses a bridge against a hazy sunset over Century Park in Vernon Hills, Ill., Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020. The smoke from dozens of wildfires in the western United States has now blanket much of the county along with parts of

Mexico and Canada, as residents thousands of miles away on the East Coast are being treated to unusually hazy skies and remarkable sunsets. (John Starks/Daily Herald via AP)



The sun sets in a hazy sky over a cornfield in Antrim Township near Greencastle, Pa., Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020. Smoke from wildfires burning on the West Coast has traveled across the United States through the jet stream and could stay in the region over the next few days. (Colleen McGrath/The Herald-Mail via AP)



A hazy sun sets over Richmond, Va., Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020. The smoke from dozens of wildfires in the western United States has now blanket much of the county along with parts of Mexico and Canada, as residents thousands of miles away on the East Coast are being treated to unusually hazy skies and remarkable sunsets. (Bob Brown/Richmond Times-Dispatch via AP)



A worker cleans grass at Alamo Square Park as smoke from wildfires and fog obscures the skyline above the "Painted Ladies," a row of historical Victorian homes, in San Francisco, Monday, Sept. 14, 2020. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)



A man looks at his cell phone while crossing a bridge as a hazy sun sets over Century Park in Vernon Hills, Ill., Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2020. The smoke from dozens of wildfires in the western United States has now blanketed much of the country along with parts of Mexico and Canada, as residents thousands of miles away on the East Coast are being treated to unusually hazy skies and remarkable sunsets. (John Starks/Daily Herald via AP)



A family of ducks swims on Oswego Lake, which is almost completely obscured by wildfire smoke, in Lake Oswego, Ore. on Monday, Sept. 14, 2020. The entire Portland metropolitan region remains under a thick blanket of smog from wildfires that are burning around the state and residents are being advised to remain indoors due to hazardous air quality. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus)



A hummingbird visits a red canna lilly flower to gather nectar while the morning sun in Springfield, Ill., is diffused by smoke from massive wildfires in western states nearly 2,000 miles away. The National Weather Service in Lincoln, Ill., said the sky in central Illinois will remain hazy the next few days. (Ted Schurter/The State Journal-Register via AP)



A sign at a Whole Foods in Lake Oswego, Ore., advises that the store is closed due to poor air quality Monday, Sept. 14, 2020. Another sign said all Whole Foods stores in the Portland Metro area will be closed at least through Thursday due to air quality. People across the West struggled under acrid-yellowish green smog from raging wildfires that seeped into homes and businesses, sneaked into cars through air conditioning vents and caused the temporary closure of iconic locations such as Powell's Books and the Oregon Zoo. And forecasters say the

putrid air, measured as the worst on the planet, could last well into the week. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus)

"Just due to all the wildfires that are going on, this is likely going to continue for a while," he said. "You might have ebbs and flows of that smoke just depending on how the upper level winds set up."

Kim Knowlton, a senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council in New York City, said she woke up Wednesday to a red sunrise and more haze.

She said millions of people who live beyond the flames can end up dealing with diminished air quality as it's not uncommon for wildfire smoke to travel hundreds of miles.

Although the health impacts are reduced the farther and higher into the atmosphere the smoke travels, Knowlton and her colleagues said the resulting haze can exacerbate existing problems like asthma and add to ozone pollution.

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