

Oregon wildfires: Half a million people flee dozens of infernos



More than 10% of Oregon's population are fleeing, according to the Oregon Office of Emergency Management - Reuters

More than half a million people in the US state of Oregon are fleeing deadly wildfires that are raging across the Pacific Northwest, authorities say.

Fanned by unusually hot, dry winds, dozens of fires are sweeping the state, and at least one is being treated as suspected arson.

Governor Kate Brown said the exact number of fatalities was not yet known, though at least four were confirmed.

More than 100 wildfires are currently scorching 12 western US states.

The worst affected are Oregon, California and Washington, where entire towns have been destroyed.

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Some 4.4 million acres have been razed, according to the National Interagency Fire Center - an area larger than Connecticut and slightly smaller than Wales.

Climate scientist Daniel Swain told the New York Times it was “really shocking” to see so many large and destructive fires burning at once.

“I’ve spoken to maybe two dozen fire and climate experts over the last 48 hours and pretty much everyone is at a loss of words. There’s certainly been nothing in living memory on this scale.”

What is the latest in Oregon?

On Thursday evening, the Oregon Office of Emergency Management confirmed the latest evacuation figures, which amount to more than 10% of the state’s 4.2 million population.

Governor Kate Brown, a Democrat, said: “We have never seen this amount of uncontained fire across the state... This will not be a one-time event. Unfortunately, it is the bellwether of the future. We’re feeling the acute impacts of climate change.”

The victims in Oregon include a 12-year-old boy and his grandmother, who died in a wildfire near Lyons, 70 miles (110km) south of Portland.

Wyatt Tofte, his dog, and his grandmother Peggy Mosso died in the family car trying to escape the blaze. The child’s mother was severely burnt.

Lonnie Bertalotto, Ms Mosso’s son and Wyatt’s uncle, confirmed the deaths in a Facebook post. “Don’t take anything in life for granted and make the best of everyday,” he wrote.



A colour infrared satellite image shows destroyed homes after the Alameda Fire in Phoenix, Oregon: burned vegetation and property appear grey, surviving vegetation is in red - Reuters

Rich Tyler, a spokesman for the Oregon State Fire Marshal's office, told Reuters news agency: "Every fire is investigated for the possibility of arson so that we can either determine it is or rule it out."

One of the most destructive blazes, the Alameda Fire, which started in Ashland near the California border, is being treated as suspicious. It has been linked to at least two deaths and destroyed hundreds of homes in the towns of Phoenix and Talent.

But rumours that fires in the Douglas County area were started by members of the left-wing "anti-fascist" or right-wing Proud Boys groups have been discounted by police.

The wildfires have also prompted mass evacuations in the suburbs of Portland, Oregon's largest city. According to the Portland Tribune newspaper, the pollution in the city on Thursday was ranked highest in the world, above Jakarta, Indonesia; Delhi, India; and Lahore, Pakistan.

Where are people evacuating?

Officials have set up 19 temporary shelters across the state for people fleeing the fires. Local news station KOIN have published a list of the centres.

Evacuation shelters have been asked to adopt “policies to prevent the spread of COVID-19”, adding that authorities should try to set up dormitories of fewer than 50 people. “Large congregate shelters should be a last resort,” a release said.

People should also consider “sheltering in place” due to the pandemic. The release added that anyone who spends time in a shelter should self-isolate once they leave as they may have been exposed to the virus.

What is the situation elsewhere?

In Washington state, a one-year-old boy died and his parents were in a critical condition after smoke and flames overwhelmed them as they tried to escape the state’s largest wildfire, in the northern county of Okanogan.

A fire also destroyed most homes in the eastern town of Malden. Police had run through the streets shouting at residents to flee as the flames closed in.

In California, authorities in Butte County north of Sacramento have found 10 bodies in the last two days, and there are fears the toll will rise as 16 people remain unaccounted for.

There, some 64,000 people were under evacuation orders while 14,000 firefighters battled 29 major fires. An evacuation order has been issued for the community of Paradise which was largely destroyed in the 2018 Camp fire.

Six of the top 20 largest fires in California’s history have occurred this year. “If you are in denial about climate change, come to California,” Governor Gavin Newsom said in August.

A study in 2019 warned that climate change has made severe wildfires more likely in California.

Saying goodbye to our first home

Sam Elm and her partner, Micah, lived in Phoenix, Oregon. Sam shared her experience fleeing from the wildfire - and saying goodbye to their home - with BBC OS.

A fire started in a nearby town and began encroaching. "It took our home," she says. "It was an intense experience."

"We were listening to the scanners... We were hearing it get closer and closer.

"At a certain point we got a call saying: 'You need to leave right now.' It was raining ash on - everything."

As they were about to leave, Sam says her wife called her upstairs to a wall in their home decorated with the signatures of friends, and members of their community - which Sam says was a "point of pride" for them.

"She slams her hand on the wall - because we've never signed our own wall, because it was our house we lived in - she traced her hand, she slammed my hand on the wall, she traced my hand, she kissed me and said: 'Don't forget this was our first home. And we left.'"



Sam Elm (left) and her wife Micah Elm had their first home burn down in a fire -
Sam and Micah Elm

Sam adds that she and her wife were the lucky ones. "Not everybody got to say goodbye to their homes - we did. Our pets are with us. We know people whose pets got stuck in their houses...we know people that are missing."

Sam and Micah are currently staying with a friend, hoping to get a hotel room through insurance.

But she doesn't know what six months down the line looks like now that they've lost their home. She says she has no clue "how to traverse any of this".

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54113416>

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