

Wildfires in New Mexico kill 2, damage or destroy 1,400 structures

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The South Fork and Salt fires continue to burn in New Mexico, forcing evacuations in the village of Ruidoso and the surrounding area. As of this writing, a combined and growing total of 23,000 acres have burned, leaving two people dead and over 1,400 structures damaged or destroyed. More than a third of the structures affected are homes.

Both fires started on Monday, June 17, with the South Fork Fire in the Lincoln National Forest, and the Salt Fire in Mescalero Tribal land. High winds and dry conditions facilitated their rapid spread.

As of Thursday, severe thunderstorms in the area are preventing effective containment by fire crews, and threaten even more damage due to flash floods.

Ruidoso is a village situated in southern New Mexico, roughly halfway between Albuquerque and El Paso, to the northeast of Holloman Air Force Base and the White Sands Missile Range. With just shy of 7,700 residents, the community is quite tight knit, and consists of mostly working class families, with a median income of \$37,000 per year.

Though small, the village is also a popular tourist destination, with the Mescalero Apache tribe operating a ski resort and a casino nearby, a horse racing track, national parks and trails, and historic buildings and sites.

One unidentified fire victim was found in a burned-out car in the driver's seat. The other victim, identified by authorities as 60-year-old Patrick Pearson, was found near a roadside by a local motel.

According to *Ruidoso News*, Pearson had attempted to evacuate and had arranged a ride with a friend. But he was unable to drive into town, as the highway was already shut down. Pearson, still recovering from surgery for a broken leg, set out on foot with a walker. He was found covered in burns, and likely succumbed

to smoke inhalation.

Describing Pearson, the family's GoFundMe set up to cover funeral costs states:

My siblings and I are very shocked and saddened by his sudden passing. He was a musician in Ruidoso and very well known around that community the past few years. Before that he was a musician in Albuquerque for decades with lifelong friends that he would play music with and entertain. He always wanted to make everyone around him happy with his music and his singing. He loved being a grandpa to 7 grandchildren, 2 of which were recently born this past year! He is going to be greatly missed by our family, friends and the musicians! Music was what he did up until the end.

This is only the latest devastating fire that residents of Ruidoso have had to contend with in recent years. In 2012, a lightning strike sparked the Little Bear Fire. While no lives were lost, a total of 44,330 acres and 254 structures burned. The final economic cost totaled over \$11 million, according to a NASA archive. This placed it as the most destructive fire in the state's history, prior to the South Fork and Salt fires.

National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) records indicate that since 1990 nearly 50,000 fires have burned 9.2 million acres in New Mexico. Roughly half are the result of human activity, with the other half caused by lightning strikes.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Centers for Environmental

Information, there has been an increase of over 2 degrees Fahrenheit in the average global surface temperature since the start of the 20th century, with the last decade being the warmest on record.

Rising temperatures have been coupled with an increase in the intensity and frequency of droughts in the American Southwest. The second worst multi-year drought, from 2011-2014, caused a near-record low in the Elephant Butte Reservoir, which provides critical water and power needs to central New Mexico and Western Texas.

The increases in temperature coupled with drought conditions exacerbate the fire season and facilitate flash flooding conditions when rain does come, as is currently demonstrated in Ruidoso.

However, these extreme and tragic events are not isolated to New Mexico. NIFC data compiled since 1983 has recorded an average of 70,000 wildfires in the US per year, with the largest fires by acreage having occurred since 2004. Additionally, the peaks of fire seasons have been occurring earlier in the year. From 1984 to 2001, peak fire season was in August. Recent fire seasons are peaking in July, burning an average of 1.7 million acres in July per year from 2002 to 2020.

In recent years, weather events in both temperature extremes have devastated entire regions, as their intensity and frequency have continued to increase. Just last January, a “bomb cyclone” brought brutal and deadly weather to nearly the entire country, affecting the lives of over 100 million people, with at least 15 losing theirs due to exposure and related circumstances.

On the other side of the spectrum, beginning earlier this week, another heat dome has settled in over the Midwest and Northeast—stretching from the Great Plains to Maine. Another is already poised to form over the Phoenix area later in the week.

The official death toll in the US from the 2023 heat waves, at 2,300 (likely a large undercount), provides a taste of what is to come, as governments and employers continue to do nothing to offer relief to those most affected—workers and their families.

As extreme weather events, hastened and intensified by human-caused climate change—rooted in the relentless drive of the capitalist’s insatiable pursuit of profit—continue to extract their toll on the lives and livelihoods of workers and their loved ones across the globe, another perspective is needed: A socialist

perspective that goes beyond the arbitrary divisions sown by national governments, that unites workers against the squandering of resources and destruction of the planet by transnational corporations, that combats the rising tide of war and dictatorship, and finally puts an end to capitalist exploitation.



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