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Hundreds dead throughout US Pacific Northwest, British Columbia in “once-in-a-millennium” heat wave

The ongoing heat wave across Western Canada and the US Pacific Northwest has been described as a “once-in-a-millennium” event, with temperatures in Portland, Oregon reaching 116 degrees Fahrenheit on Monday, Seattle, Washington reaching 108 degrees over the weekend, and 116 degrees in Vancouver, British Columbia.



A farmworker wipes sweat from his neck while working, Thursday, July 1, 2021, in St. Paul, Ore. [Credit: AP Photo/Nathan Howard]

Among the highest temperatures reached was in the town of Lytton, British Columbia, which breached 121 degrees Fahrenheit. On Monday, people were evacuated as several wildfires tore through the town.

Such temperatures are unbearable for human life, as evinced by the hundreds of people who have so far died. This includes at least 486 “sudden and unexpected” deaths between Saturday and Wednesday and another 60 fatalities in Oregon have been linked to the heat and more than a dozen in Washington. Many more deaths are expected as the heat wave across the Pacific Northwest continues and coroners complete their investigations into the surge in deaths.

The Sunrise Center, an emergency shelter in Portland, Oregon, set up for protection from the February winter storm that hit the Pacific Northwest this year, is now being used as a cooling shelter from the blistering heat.

Caleb Coder, who helped set up the emergency center told the *Financial Times* (FT), “People were literally crawling to the Sunrise Center because it was so hot. They were vomiting, burnt and dehydrated.” “Hundreds of people came through because we had water stations, misters and a shower truck,” as temperatures reached 116 degrees. “Had Sunrise not been there...” he trailed off. “It was life-saving.”

Other extreme recent deadly events have hit Australia, California and Siberia with deadly wildfires caused by extreme heat. Death Valley, California reached a scorching 127.7 in June, a record high for that month. The increased frequency of such weather events raises whether such “once-in-a-millennium” events will become once a century, a decade, or even a year, and whether humanity is prepared for the consequences of global climate catastrophes. The western US has especially suffered a gruesome combination of heat waves, droughts and wildfires in recent years, putting immense strain on its infrastructure.

“There is an emerging consensus that this is some kind of new normal,” Dr. Jennifer Vines, lead health officer for Oregon’s tri-county region, told the FT. As well as this week’s heat wave, she pointed to the February “snowpocalypse” and the wildfires last year that hugely polluted Portland’s air. “How are we going to structure ourselves in our responses, given the intensity, the frequency and the sense of urgency that we’ve faced literally every few months over the past year?”

The blistering temperatures in the US and Canada this week were caused by an atmospheric high-pressure zone known as a heat dome. These conditions arise when the jet stream, a band of fast-moving air high in the atmosphere, develops a large wave pattern that keeps the dome locked in place. Global warming has pushed up the planet's average temperature, which is about 1.2 degrees Celsius warmer now than in 1850. While heatwaves are not new, they are becoming much more extreme due to this expanded warming trend.

Fragile infrastructure has shattered under the pressure. In Washington, roads began to crack and buckle, and bags of ice quickly sold out at stores around Seattle, where less than half of the population has any kind of air conditioning. The extreme temperatures over a four-day period sunk in as the West Coast was already preparing for yet another severe wildfire season.

The heat has intensified a 20-year "mega-drought" that has brought a deepening water crisis to the region. As well as causing more evaporation from reservoirs, rising temperatures dry out the ground and increase the amount of water soaked up by plants, reducing run-off. "What we are seeing in the American West is a long-term warming and drying," Brad Udall, a climate research scientist at Colorado State University, explained to the FT, with temperature increases accounting for about half the decline in the water flow through the Colorado River since 2000.

The flow of the river, a vital source of water for the residents of California, Arizona and Nevada as well as farmers, has dropped by a fifth since the start of the century. "There are agricultural users who won't get enough water. It's a really harsh reality," Udall said. The increasingly common disruption has left many US cities and industries pondering if and how they can manage inevitable future weather events.

President Joe Biden held a virtual meeting Wednesday with several western states' governors: Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming, during which he rattled off a series of obvious facts, "Climate change is driving the dangerous confluence of extreme heat and prolonged drought," as well as jabs against climate change deniers, "But don't worry—there is no global warming because it's just a figment of our imaginations."

Such attempts at sarcasm, however, fall flat. It has been the US government, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, that has denied the implications of climate change by pursuing policies that are either ultimately empty, such as Obama's signing of the "historic" Paris Accords, or Donald Trump's outright ecological vandalism.

Biden's words are also belied by his aggressive stance toward Russia and China. Climate change is an inherently global problem and requires an internationally coordinated system, which is impossible under such tensions, all of which involve countries armed with nuclear weapons. As such, it falls on the working class, the only international social force on the planet, to stop the ongoing and accelerated ecological crisis.

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