

2015 Washington wildfires

The 2015 wildfire season was the largest in Washington state history,^[5] with more than one million acres (400,000 ha; 1,600 sq mi) burning across the state from June to September.^[1] As many as 3,000 firefighters including 800 Washington National Guard members were deployed to fight the fires.^{[6][7]} The 17th Field Artillery Brigade of the United States Army also deployed 200 soldiers from Joint Base Lewis–McChord to help fight the fires.^[8]

On August 21, President Barack Obama declared the fires a federal emergency.^[9] Because of the enormous extent of the fire activity, for the first time in Washington state history, officials asked residents to volunteer to assist in fighting the wildfires.^[9] On August 24, the Washington Department of Natural Resources announced the Okanogan Complex fire had become the largest fire complex in Washington State history.^[10]

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources called the season the "worst-ever" in the state's history.^[11]

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Progression and response

June

2015 Washington wildfires



Smoke plume over the Wolverine Fire on August 4

| Statistics | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Total fires | 1,541 ^[1] |
| Total area | 1,005,423 acres (406,880 ha) ^[1] |
| Cost | \$253 million ^[2] |
| Fatalities | 3 ^[3] |
| Injuries | 4 ^[4] |
| Season | |
| ← 2014 | 2016 → |

June 2015 was a remarkably hot month for the state of Washington, with average temperatures between 4 and 9 °F (2 and 5 °C) above normal conditions, setting new records.^{[12][13]}

By June 23, there had already been 313 wildfires across the state.^[14]

Governor's action

Governor Jay Inslee issued a proclamation on June 26, declaring a state of emergency to exist in all Washington state counties, implementing the *Washington State Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan*, and ordering deployment of National Guard and other organized militia for incident-related service assistance, all because of the predicted risk of wildfires in the wake of significantly drier-than-average weather in June.^{[14][15]} The Commissioner of Public Lands Peter J. Goldmark, head of the Washington Department of Natural Resources, issued an updated burn ban to the one issued June 22, as the earlier ban was superseded by the Governor's proclamation. The Commissioner's prohibition of campfires in state forests, state parks and state forestlands until September 30, 2015, was issued June 26, 2015.^{[14][16]}

Sleepy Hollow fire

The season began unprecedentedly early with the Sleepy Hollow Fire on June 28, affecting the city of Wenatchee in Chelan County, Washington. It burned 2,950 acres, destroying 29 homes and several commercial buildings.^[17] The cause of the fire is under investigation but is "likely human-caused".^[18] Officials said the fire's unusual intensity was caused by drought and record high temperatures.^[19] As a safety precaution, officials banned Fourth of July fireworks in many parts of the state.^[20] A man was arrested in connection with the fire, confessing to starting it with a disposable lighter, but faced no charges due to his mental illness.^[21]

July

By July 12, over 16,000 acres had burned, including a single fire near Ephrata, in Grant County, that had burned at least 10,000 acres.^[22] Later in the month, another major fire was triggered by farm equipment near Walla Walla and burned more than 6,000 acres over two weeks.^[23]

August

The extent of wildfires in August 2015 led to the federal declaration of a state of emergency in Washington state by President Barack Obama on August 21, 2015.^{[24][25]}

By August 24, over 16 active fires had burned more than 920 square miles (2,400 km²).^[26]

On August 29 there was concern that unusually strong southerly winds would cause "significant growth" of the Tunk Block and Lime Belt fires in the Okanogan complex and growth in the Chelan complex fires. The Twisp River and Nine Mile fires were about 95 percent contained.^[27]

Chelan Complex

Three fires on the south end of Lake Chelan, near the city of Chelan, merged into a complex fire and forced the immediate evacuation of over 1,000 residents on August 14.^[28] By August 16, the Reach Complex Fire had grown to 54,500 acres (22,100 ha), while the Wolverine fire burned nearly 39,000 acres (16,000 ha).^[29] According to Rico Smith, a spokesman for



MODIS aerial imagery of Washington on August 22, showing the Puget Sound region covered in smoke from wildfires in Eastern Washington.

the fire fighters near Chelan, by August 29 "about 85 homes, businesses and other residences [had] been destroyed by the Chelan complex fires."^[27]

Okanogan Complex

The Okanogan Complex Fire was formed from five separate wildfires in Okanogan County, of which all but one were caused by lightning strikes, burning approximately 96,034 acres (38,864 ha) by August 20.^[30] The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) authorized the use of federal grants on August 14 for the Nine Mile Fire, one of the five fires that are part of the Okanogan Complex, determining that it constituted a "major disaster".^[31] Over 1,300 residents in the towns of Twisp and Winthrop were ordered to evacuate because of the approaching Twisp River Fire.^[4] On August 19, 2015, three firefighters were killed battling a wildfire near Twisp.^[32]

By August 24, the fire had grown to 256,657 acres (103,865 ha),^[33] surpassing the Carlton Complex fire of 2014 to become the largest wildfire complex in Washington state history.^[26] By August 28 "at least 45 primary residences, 49 cabins and 60 outbuildings [were] destroyed in the Okanogan complex fires."^[27] The size of the complex peaked at 304,782 acres (123,341 ha) on August 30,^[34] before the transfer of the 161,440-acre (65,330 ha) Tunk Block Fire under the North Star Fire on August 31.^[35]

By August 28 "at least 45 primary residences, 49 cabins and 60 outbuildings [were] destroyed in the Okanogan complex fires."^[27]

September

International assistance

After the emergency declaration in August, President Obama^[9] asked Australian Fire Services (including those of the Black Saturday bushfires) to aid the depleted American services.^[36] By August 24, about 70 fire managers from Australia and New Zealand arrived at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, to be briefed and provided with gear before heading west to fight the fires.^[37]

Air quality

As a result of the wildfires, air quality across the state and into Canada^[38] dropped to unhealthy levels in many cities and led to the issuing of several air quality alerts by the U.S. National Weather Service^{[39][40]} and Environment Canada. Omak, located 15 miles (24 km) northeast of the Okanogan Complex fire, reported an air quality index rating of 500 on August 24.^{[41][42]} The city of Spokane, 150 miles (240 km) from the fires, reported a rating of 188 on August 24, forcing high school athletics and other outdoor activities to be canceled.^{[41][43]} By Tuesday, August 25, Environment Canada had posted an Air Quality Health Index alert for cities as far away as Calgary, Alberta—400 miles (640 km)—with a score of 12. The Canadian Air Quality Health Index, measured on a scale of one to 10-plus with 10 as "very high risk", is based on measurements of "ozone at ground level, particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide".^{[44][45]} By Wednesday the third day of the thick haze of smoke, air quality in Calgary scored 17.^{[46][47]}

Smoke from the Chelan Complex fire was pushed westward over Seattle and the Puget Sound region by upper level winds on August 22, causing hazy weather and worsened air quality for several days.^{[48][49]}



An airtanker plane dropping fire retardant over the advancing Chelan Butte wildfire (part of the Chelan Complex fire)

Aftermath

In December, Governor Jay Inslee proposed a supplemental budget that included \$178 million to cover the costs incurred by the state in fighting the wildfires.^{[50][51]}

List of fires

As of August 28, 2015^[52]

| Name | Location | Area burned ^[n 1] | | Dates | | Cause | Notes |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------|-----------------|------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| | | Acres | Hectares | Began/Reported | Ended ^[n 2] | | |
| 231 fire | <u>Spokane Indian Reservation and Stevens County</u> | 1,138 | 461 | July 3, 2015 | July 12, 2015 | Under investigation | |
| Alder Lake fire | <u>Gifford Pinchot National Forest</u> | 253 | 102 | July 26, 2015 | Active (10% contained) | <u>Lightning</u> | |
| Blankenship fire | <u>Okanogan and Wenatchee national forests</u> | 180 | 73 | July 14, 2015 | Active | | |
| Blue Creek fire | <u>Walla Walla County</u> | 6,004 | 2,430 | July 20, 2015 | Active (95% contained) | Under investigation | |
| Carpenter Road fire | <u>Spokane Indian Reservation and Stevens County</u> | 46,691 | 18,895 | August 12, 2015 | Active (25% contained) | Unknown | |
| Chelan Complex | <u>Chelan County</u> | 90,210 | 36,510 | August 14, 2015 | Active (52% contained) | | Complex of 5 fires |
| Colville Complex | <u>Ferry and Stevens counties</u> | 9,879 | 3,998 | August 14, 2015 | Active (48% contained) | | Complex of 3 fires |
| Cougar Creek | <u>Yakama Indian Reservation and Gifford Pinchot National Forest</u> | 49,200 | 19,900 | August 10, 2015 | Active (25% contained) | Lightning | |
| Douglas County Complex | <u>Douglas County</u> | 22,337 | 9,039 | July 10, 2015 | July 15, 2015 | Lightning | Complex of 2 fires |
| Grizzly Bear Complex | <u>Umatilla National Forest</u> | 72,421 | 29,308 | August 13, 2015 | Active (10% contained) | Lightning | Complex of 17 fires; includes portion in <u>Oregon</u> |
| Highway 8 fire | <u>Klickitat County</u> | 33,100 | 13,400 | August 4, 2015 | Active (95% contained) | Unknown | |
| Kaniksu Complex | <u>Colville National Forest and Pend Oreille County</u> | 16,335 | 6,611 | August 11, 2015 | Active (10% contained) | Lightning | Complex of 7 fires |
| Kettle Complex | <u>Ferry County</u> | 62,292 | 25,209 | August 11, 2015 | Active (16% contained) | Lightning | Complex of 3 fires |
| Marble Valley | <u>Stevens County</u> | 3,087 | 1,249 | August 14, 2015 | Active (85% contained) | Unknown | |

| Name | Location | Area burned ^[n 1] | | Dates | | Cause | Notes |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | | Acres | Hectares | Began/Reported | Ended ^[n 2] | | |
| Mount Adams Complex | Gifford Pinchot National Forest | 405 | 164 | July 10, 2015 | Active (78% contained) | Unknown | Complex of 4 fires |
| Newby Lake fire | Okanogan and Wenatchee national forests | 5,065 | 2,050 | July 2, 2015 | Active (95% contained) | Lightning | Includes portion in <u>British Columbia</u> |
| North Boulder 2 | Ferry County | 233 | 94 | July 20, 2015 | Active (80% contained) | Lightning | |
| North Star | <u>Colville Indian Reservation</u> , Colville National Forest, and Okanogan and Ferry counties | 192,900 | 78,100 | August 13, 2015 | Active (22% contained) | <u>Human</u> | |
| <u>Okanogan Complex</u> | <u>Okanogan County</u> | 302,224 | 122,306 | August 15, 2015 | Active (12% contained) | Lightning | Complex of 5 fires; second-largest in Washington state history ^[26] Includes portion in British Columbia |
| Paradise Fire | <u>Olympic National Park</u> | 2,796 | 1,132 | May 15, 2015 | Active (40% contained) | Lightning | |
| PC Complex | Clark and <u>Cowlitz counties</u> | 129 | 52 | July 16, 2015 | July 24, 2015 | Human | Complex of 5 fires |
| Saddle Lakes fire | <u>Saddle Mountain National Wildlife Refuge</u> | 14,357 | 5,810 | June 28, 2015 | July 16, 2015 | Lightning | |
| Sleepy Hollow fire | Chelan County | 2,950 | 1,190 | June 28, 2015 | July 6, 2015 | Human ^[53] | |
| Thunder Creek | <u>North Cascades National Park</u> | 103 | 42 | May 30, 2015 | Active (60% contained) | Lightning | |
| Twenty-One Mile Grade | Colville Indian Reservation | 2,250 | 910 | July 1, 2015 | July 10, 2015 | Human | |

| Name | Location | Area burned ^[n 1] | | Dates | | Cause | Notes |
|----------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------|-----------------|------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| | | Acres | Hectares | Began/Reported | Ended ^[n 2] | | |
| Upper Skagit Complex | North Cascades National Park | 7,878 | 3,188 | August 10, 2015 | Active (37% contained) | Lightning | Complex of 8 fires |
| Williams fire | Stevens County | 332 | 134 | July 3, 2015 | July 10, 2015 | Under investigation | |
| Wolverine fire | Wenatchee National Forest | 62,167 | 25,158 | June 29, 2015 | Active (28% contained) | Lightning | Part of Chelan Complex |

Notes

- At greatest extent.
- Indicates date the fire was declared 100% contained.

See also

- [2015 California wildfires](#)
- [2015 Oregon wildfires](#)

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External links

- [Inciweb \(http://inciweb.nwccg.gov/state/49/\)](http://inciweb.nwccg.gov/state/49/)
 - [NWCC – Northwest Fire Locations \(http://gacc.nifc.gov/nwcc/information/firemap.aspx\)](http://gacc.nifc.gov/nwcc/information/firemap.aspx)
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