



# COVER CLIMATE

August 8, 2018

## **Burning in Silence: U.S. Media Falls Short on Connecting Wildfires to Climate Change**

*Media Outlets Are Failing to Report on the Connection Between Climate Change to Increasingly Destructive Wildfires*

Extreme heat, drought conditions and longer warm seasons—all events linked to a warming planet—increase the risk of wildfire including those currently ravaging California.

Following the state's hottest summer [in history](#) in 2017, bone-dry conditions this year prompted an [unusually early](#) start to fire season. In July 2018, [record-breaking temperatures](#) scorched California once again and set the stage for some of the largest and most destructive fires in the state's history.

On July 23, an innocuous flat tire [sparked](#) as the metallic rim struck roadway, setting Highway 299 ablaze. The resulting Carr fire surged across the region near Redding, Calif., which has since [killed seven people](#).

The Mendocino Complex fire, which began on July 27, now claims the title of [the largest wildfire](#) in California's history. As of Aug. 7, the Carr fire had burned 167,113 acres and the Mendocino Complex fire had burned 290,692 acres.

As extreme phenomenon, such as “firenadoes”—[twisters of flames](#) extending from the earth to the sky—continue to cascade across the state, it is clear climate change has pushed seasonal weather patterns into [unseen territory](#).

Other areas of the world are also burning. In [Greece](#), wildland fires killed 91 late last month. Wildfire seasons are now more than [two and a half months](#) longer than historical averages, and the harmful impacts extend [far beyond](#) the reach of the flames.

## **The U.S. Media Fails to Communicate the Role of Climate Change in Destructive Wildfires**

In light of this tragedy and destruction—and its close connection to human-caused climate change, the media should be drawing that connection loudly and explicitly so that the public

learns what is causing the problem, why it's getting worse, and how we can fix it. Outlets should be looking for the contributing factors and consulting with climate experts to communicate about the problem and solutions. As evidenced by this review, far too few are.

A Public Citizen survey of the top 50 U.S. newspapers by circulation found that of 862 pieces mentioning wildfires between July 23 and August 7, only 109 (12.6 percent) also mentioned climate change or global warming.

The three newspapers that produced the most pieces connecting the raging wildfires to climate change were *The New York Times* with 17 articles, *The Sacramento Bee* with 16 articles, and the *Los Angeles Times* with 15 articles.

Of 296 broadcast transcripts from ABC, CBS, Fox News Network, MSNBC and NBC in this period, only 32, or about 11 percent of pieces, also mentioned climate change. In absolute terms, the best performing network was CNN, with 20 transcripts discussing how the wildfires were spurred by a hotter, drier climate.

Among newspapers in California mentioning wildfires, just 84 of 872 pieces made the connection to global warming—less than 10 percent—a dismally small number for a state in crisis. Clearly, reporters are covering these record fires, the destruction they are causing, and the difficulty in containing them. But rarely are papers delving into how we are making the fires worse by fueling climate change, or how we can change course.

Top California newspapers<sup>1</sup> performed slightly better, producing 54 pieces mentioning climate change of 366 total pieces (about 15 percent on average). As before, the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Sacramento Bee* emerged with the most articles that mentioned global warming. *The Fresno Bee* lagged far behind, with just a single piece making the connection.

When outlets discuss startling and rare phenomena like the multiple fire tornadoes appearing in California, one might expect it to be more likely they would draw the connection between extreme events and our increasingly volatile, greenhouse-gas-fueled climate. But the top 50 U.S. newspapers generally failed to draw these conclusions, discussing climate change even less frequently in the context of fire tornadoes than wildfires generally. Although 48 pieces reported on fire tornadoes, just 8 (less than 17 percent) discussed climate change. Broadcast networks performed significantly worse, with an abysmal 6.5 percent, or 2 of 31 pieces, mentioning global warming when discussing fire whirls.

---

<sup>1</sup> Westlaw identifies the following as “top newspapers” in the state: *Fresno Bee*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Sacramento Bee*, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *San Jose Mercury News*.

It is critical that the media provide context for extreme events like the unprecedented wildfires raging through California. When outlets fail to connect these events to global warming, audiences are left uninformed that climate change is already here, impacting millions of Americans, and will rapidly worsen if we don't act quickly. And they are missing yet another opportunity for serious discussion about not just the severity and urgency of the climate threat, but what we can do to fix it.

## Methodology

For this analysis, we used Westlaw and LexisNexis to search print newspapers for iterations of the terms “wildfire” and “fire tornado,”<sup>2</sup> then searched for those terms and either “climate change” or “global warming.” We examined the top 50 U.S. newspapers by circulation,<sup>3</sup> six major broadcast networks,<sup>4</sup> and all California state papers in Westlaw. We excluded obvious letters to the editors that had the word “letters” in the title. In addition, we removed false positives from the tallies for broadcast transcripts. These occur when one of our search terms appears in the same transcript as “climate change” or “global warming,” but in a different, unrelated segment. The period covered by this analysis is the beginning of the Carr fire, July 23, to mid-day August 7, 2018.

---

<sup>2</sup> The terms were: “wildfire,” “wildland fire,” or “forest fire,” and “firenado,” “fire tornado,” or “fire whirl,” respectively. We searched Westlaw for all sources except *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, for which we used LexisNexis.

<sup>3</sup> The outlets are: *Arizona Republic*, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Boston Globe*, *Buffalo News*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Columbus Dispatch*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Denver Post*, *Detroit Free Press*, *East Bay Times*, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Indianapolis Star*, *Kansas City Star*, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Mercury News*, *Miami Herald*, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Tribune-Review*, *Oklahoman*, *Omaha World-Herald*, *Orange County Register*, *Oregonian*, *Portland*, *Orlando Sentinel*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Plain Dealer*, *Sacramento Bee*, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Seattle Times*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, *Star Tribune*, *Star-Ledger*, *Sun-Sentinel*, *Tampa Bay Times*, *Times-Picayune*, *USA Today*, *Virginian-Pilot*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*.

<sup>4</sup> The outlets are: ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox News Network, MSNBC and NBC.