



## California Wildfires Talking Points

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### 2020 WILDFIRES

- Multiple active wildfires have affected destinations across California – burning at unprecedented rates in 2020.
- California’s tourism industry is incredibly grateful for the first responders working to keep residents and visitors safe.
- Firefighting crews have successfully protected many population centers and major metropolitan areas, and are continuing to establish containment lines that protect lives and property.

### FIRE SEASON IN THE AMERICAN WEST

- California is a safe destination with an abundance of experiences to enjoy year-round.
- Warm, dry late-summer and autumn conditions make for a beautiful experience in California, but also higher risk for fires, a natural occurrence up and down the West Coast and many other parts of the world.
- West Coast wildfire season may begin as early as July when temperatures rise, through December, depending on rain levels, which vary across the state’s many climates.
- Fires may occur across the state, and predominantly break out in remote, forested areas away from population centers. It is not uncommon for multiple fires to be burning simultaneously, with little to no disruption of most residents’ daily lives.
- Fire season typically includes occasional public safety power shutoffs to reduce the risk of additional fires.
- When fires are burning, air quality can suffer in communities that are not directly affected by fires.
  - It is unusual for California wildfires to result in damage to tourism infrastructure – leaving the visitor experience largely intact.
  - While media coverage of fires often results in consumer perception that affected areas are heavily devastated, communities typically reopen for business immediately upon fire containment.

- While the 2017, 2018 and 2019 fire seasons certainly affected a handful of destinations greatly – especially rural regions dominated by small, family-owned businesses – the overall economic impact to the state as a whole was not significant.
- Travelers don't have a good understanding of how vast California is. The state comprises 100 million acres. 2020's fire season has so far burned 3.2 million acres, about 3 percent of the state's land mass.
- Travelers may be hesitant to return to an area that has been affected by tragedy, and destinations work hard to share an "open for business" message with the world. This practice is complicated by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, as the travel experience is affected across the board by local restrictions and virus prevention.

## **FIRES NATURALLY OCCUR, BUT CLIMATE CHANGE INCREASES EXTREME WEATHER**

- Wildfires have happened naturally for centuries, and every green forest enjoyed today has burned at some point in history.
- Fires play a critical role in the lifecycle of a forest, naturally reseeding trees, diversifying the landscape and supporting new plant and wildlife that depend on burned areas to regenerate and thrive. Wildfires are to forests what rain is to the rainforest.
- From the 1920s through the 1950s, 30 million to 60 million acres burned across the United States. In the past decade, fire suppression has shrunk burned areas to 4 million to 10 million acres, leaving greater swaths of forest more vulnerable to both naturally occurring and human-caused fires.
  - 2018: 8.8 million U.S. acres/1.7 million California acres burned
  - 2019: 4.7 million U.S. acres/270,000 California acres burned
- Today, fires are exacerbated by ongoing issues related to heat and drought.
- No one can outrun climate change, which manifests itself in extreme weather conditions becoming more prevalent around the world.
- Climate change affects overall temperatures and weather, but also snowpack rates, water availability, agriculture and sea levels, according to the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#).
- California is not alone in grappling with wildfires. Nearly a dozen western U.S. states – Oregon and Washington in particular – and destinations such as Australia, Portugal and Canada see regularly occurring forest fires.

## **CALIFORNIA LEADS IN CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY**

- California is the fifth-largest economy in the world – long seen as a global leader in environmental best practices, including climate change policy.

- No destination is better positioned culturally and politically to take action that will ameliorate environmental degradation that contributes to wildfires.
- Near term, California and the U.S. Forest Service [have agreed](#) to roughly double the acreage they thin through controlled burns and other techniques.
- Long term, state leaders are poised to stiffen goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions that are already toughest in the nation.
- Travel consumers already have accepted California as a leader: Two-thirds of global travelers identify California as “a place that cares about the environment and our natural resources,” according to a 2019 global brand health study.

## TRAVELING DURING ACTIVE FIRES

- Visit California’s Responsible Travel Code asks everyone to do their part in preserving California and to ensure the safety of themselves, California communities and visitors. This includes practicing extreme caution during dry conditions and following all laws regarding open fires, as well as having an emergency plan and following any evacuation orders.
- Before traveling, visitors should:
  - research areas on their itinerary– it may be possible to easily reroute a trip to a nearby California destination in the case of interruption by fire-related effects
  - consult local weather and air-quality forecasts in the destination they plan to visit, as well as looking for any alerts (Red Flag Warnings, Fire Weather Watch) and possible closures (roads, parks, forests)
  - check local government websites to sign up for emergency alerts and download the Cal Fire app to refer to while in the state.
- Travelers with trips planned to an area affected by active fires should:
  - contact lodging providers for the latest on-the-ground information, including whether evacuations, closures or preventative power shutoffs are possible, or whether rooms are needed for evacuees from surrounding affected communities
  - speak to their airline about canceling or rescheduling flights. Typically flights run as usual unless air quality is severely impacted.
- Travelers in a destination affected by fires should:
  - understand the local community’s evacuation plan
  - be sure keep a half-tank of gas in their vehicles and some emergency provisions on hand
  - be mindful of poor air quality’s effects and consider staying indoors and reducing physical activity if smoke has made the air unhealthy. People experiencing health effects from a smoky environment may benefit from using a tight-fitting N95 or P100 particulate respirator to reduce exposure.
- Visitors who are planning a trip to an affected region can check [VisitCalifornia.com](http://VisitCalifornia.com) and [WestCoastTravelFacts.org](http://WestCoastTravelFacts.org) for more information, including real-time air-quality resources.

## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND YOUR COMMUNITY

- Experiencing an active fire situation or continuously seeing dramatic imagery of fires on the news can take an emotional toll.
- Mental health plays a critical role in creating resilience and surviving times of crisis and recovery.
- In the face of fires and other natural disasters, acts of personal protection and self-care can help California residents and visitors alike to work through challenging times.
- Simple actions such as having a relocation plan in place or limiting exposure to crisis-related news to only what is absolutely critical for safety can help to mentally frame the situation and cope through the crisis.
- Before traveling, know how to take care of yourself physically and mentally. For example, communicate with your accommodations about fire-related plans and procedures, familiarize yourself with local fire and air quality resources, and create an evacuation plan before it is necessary.
- In crisis situations, remember to breathe. Finding a safe space to take just a few deep breaths can reverse the impacts of fight-or-flight response and help to manage situational stress. [ref: [SF Health Service System](#)]