

Is the Northeast Entering Its Wildfire Era?

The New York region is unlikely to ever have as many brush fires as out West. But residents need to be ready for more droughts.

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By Hilary Howard

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Rocky and Ren Hazelman run a chicken farm in West Milford, N.J., about 10 miles south from the Jennings Creek Wildfire along the state's border with New York.

Their 2,000 chickens require about 150 gallons of water daily, and the couple usually has no trouble collecting the needed rainwater for the job. But that is no longer possible: An extraordinarily dry fall has brought some of the worst drought conditions in the region in decades.

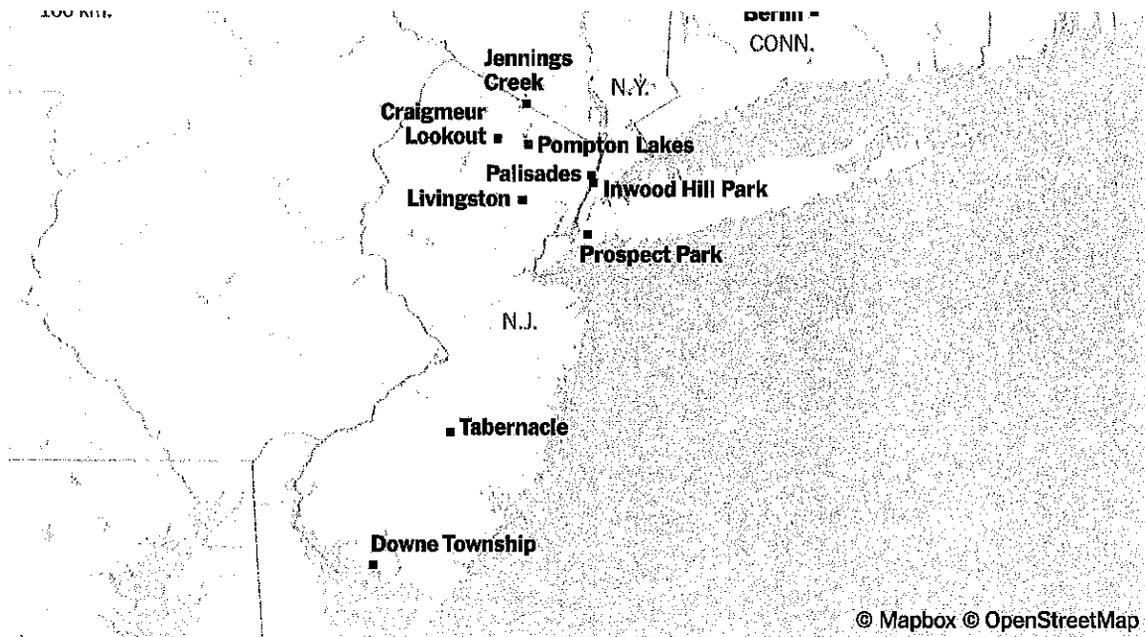
The weather extremes caused by global warming, which are making it harder for the Hazelmans to tend to their flock, are the same ones draining reservoirs and sparking wildfires across the Northeast, like the 5,300-acre Jennings blaze, which is now mostly contained, down the road from their farm.

The Northeast will almost certainly never experience the scale of wildfires seen in more rural Western states. But experts say that the region should prepare for more periodic droughts, which will increase the risk of fires, because of the weather-distorting effects of greenhouse gases.

Recent Wildfires Near New York City

Since July





By William B. Davis and Julie Walton Shaver

Sudden and extreme shifts from wet to dry seasons, which will become increasingly common as the world heats up, experts said, feed a cycle of vegetation growth that then dries out rapidly, providing ample fuel for fires.

“We started the year with the wettest conditions in 40-plus years, which made for a lot of lush vegetation,” said Bill Kirk, the chief executive of Weathertrends360, a company that provides long-term weather forecasts. But since June, he said, the region has been the driest it has been in more than four decades. Mr. Kirk predicted that dry conditions in the Northeast would continue into 2025.



Rocky Hazelman tends to some 2,000 chickens, which require about 150 gallons of water every day, on his farm in West Milford, N.J. The drought has caused his cistern and storage tanks, which collect rain water, to go dry. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

New Jersey and southern New York, including New York City, are under a drought warning, the last step before mandatory water restrictions are put into place, while Connecticut is under a drought advisory, which does not require conservation efforts among residents.

The last time New York City officials were this concerned about drought conditions was more than 20 years ago, when officials eventually instituted a drought emergency and mandatory restrictions.

The last meaningful rainfall in the region was more than 90 days ago. Since Oct. 1, the New York City area has received about a quarter-inch. The city's reservoirs, which typically at this time of year would be at close to 80 percent capacity, are down to about 60 percent. In central New Jersey one reservoir that serves over a million residents is more than half-empty.

Rainfall that is expected to begin late Wednesday and last into Thursday is “not a drought buster, but it will help,” forecasters with the National Weather Service in New York City said. Moderate to heavy rainfall may occur after midnight and into the Thursday morning commute, with totals reaching an inch or a little bit higher.

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The precipitation will begin to address what is roughly an eight-inch deficit of the rainfall usually seen in the New York City area this time of year, weather experts said.

Currently, more than two-thirds of the United States is experiencing abnormally dry conditions, and about 40 percent of the country — over 149 million acres — is in a drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

“The weather whiplash we’ve seen is more likely to happen in a warmer world,” said Matthew Rodell, a hydrologist with the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Md. Rising heat, fueled by burning fossil fuels, can supercharge weather events — including storms and droughts — making them more intense, he said.

As humans continue adding greenhouse gases like methane and carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, experts say, temperatures will continue to rise, which will drive extreme weather events like droughts, wildfires and floods.

“When it’s warmer, the air is thirstier,” Dr. Rodell said, so it pulls more moisture out of the soil and plants, drying them out faster. He predicts more frequent and severe droughts in the future across the globe, including in the Northeast.

In recent weeks, some 860 wildfires have burned across New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

Since early October, the dry conditions have sparked some 860 wildfires across New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, burning thousands of acres and causing the deaths of two emergency workers. The two largest fires this summer and fall were in New Jersey, the fastest-warming state in the Northeast and the one facing the most extreme drought conditions.

New York City has had more than 270 brush fires this month alone, the most in the city's history. In response, city officials announced its first-ever Brush Fire Task Force this week. The blazes have caused no serious injuries or property damage. Still, it has been startling to residents of a city unaccustomed to wildfires to see Prospect Park in Brooklyn and Inwood Hill Park in Manhattan on fire.

The two-acre fire in Prospect Park harmed numerous trees and destroyed various native species. "It was devastating to see this treasured woodland almost destroyed," Morgan Monaco, the president of the Prospect Park Alliance, a

nonprofit, said. It was yet another sign of climate change: A little over a year ago, sudden flooding turned much of the park's central lawn into something akin to the Colorado River, Ms. Monaco said.

In New Jersey, the Forest Fire Service has responded to more than 530 fires since early October, more than 10 times the number in the same period last year. Bone-dry conditions in the state, which has seen more fires than neighboring New York or Connecticut, have allowed one blaze in Tabernacle, a township east of Philadelphia, to burn continually since July 4, feeding off tree roots underground.

"We have never experienced conditions like this," said Bill Donnelly, chief of the fire service. Across the country, burned acreage has more than tripled between last year and this year, to over eight million acres.

Residents in the New York region, most of whom are already familiar with heavy snowstorms, flooding and gusty Nor'easters, should consider incorporating more drought and fire readiness into their lives, experts said.

It might be time to do the kind of fire safety planning in the Northeast that is more common in California, said Alistair Hayden, a professor in the department of public and ecosystem health at Cornell University. That means keeping flammable items, like bushes and wooden fences, away from homes, as well as from roads and infrastructure. "You don't want flaming trees falling across your evacuation route," he said.

More training and resources will be needed for emergency responders as well. New York State's forest rangers, 35 of whom have worked the Jennings Creek blaze so far, "do not have the manpower to respond to something of this nature," said Major Robert Rogers, a forest ranger for the state and an incident commander for the Jennings fire. He called the blaze "one of the largest fires in New York in probably over a century."

The state's forest rangers are working with local volunteers, several state agencies and fire departments, as well as wildland firefighters from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana, who arrived last week, as part of a federal emergency

response system.

Regions can request more resources to combat wildfires — be it fire personnel or equipment — through the National Interagency Coordination Center, a federal agency based in Boise, Idaho, which deployed the tribal crew from Montana to New York.

The center also dispatches the roughly 18,000 federal emergency responders from agencies like the Bureau of Land Management and the United States Forest Service, said Luke Mayfield, the president of Grassroots Wildland Firefighters, a nonprofit.

There will be a need for more wildland firefighters in the future, Mr. Mayfield said.

“Wildland fire wasn’t supposed to be a year-round career,” he said. “It was supposed to be something that happened rarely or seasonally that you could do as a side hustle.” Fire seasons, he explained, have turned into fire years.

On his chicken farm, Mr. Hazelman has experienced both heavy rainfall and drought conditions within the last 12 months.

He has mitigated for both, building out ditches to divert storm water away from his buildings and animals while installing the cistern and tanks to collect that same storm water for the dry spells.

Still, the Hazelmans find themselves making compromises. A few weeks ago, they stopped watering their 200 mums across the 70-acre property in order to conserve water for the livestock. They are also worried about the smoke from the fire damaging their 18 beehives. “It’s hard to hold out,” Mr. Hazelman said.

Hilary Howard is a Times reporter covering how the New York City region is adapting to climate change and other environmental challenges. More about Hilary Howard