

THE WORLD IS ON FIRE

As the Earth heats up, communities across the nation endure fires, air pollution and extreme heat. And it's only getting worse.

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MAUI, HI

Lillian Poag ended her summer trying to escape a climate dystopia.

Poag, a deputy editor on The Review, travels to Maui every year to visit family, including her aunt, a native Hawaiian. Although Poag was just 20 miles from Lahaina, the epicenter of the firestorm, she was unaware of the crisis for nearly two days.

Maui sustained nearly \$6 billion in damages, including over 2,000 burnt acres and at least 97 deaths. It is the deadliest fire in modern American history.

After her family's condominium lost power, she had neither cell service nor access to any information. The next day, the local grocery store looked like a scene from "a zombie apocalypse," as Poag put it. "We were terrified," she said. "We still had no idea what was happening."

At the grocery store, locals informed her family that Lahaina was in ashes. Poag wanted to help evacuate her 85-year-old aunt, but a lack of resources limited their options. Because the only open road was one-way towards Lahaina, they would have no way to get home if they went to help. They couldn't help the locals, and they couldn't go home.

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LILLIAN POAG

Poag's family ventured about four miles east each day to an abandoned airport to get cell service, but they still could not check the news. Their only source of information was occasional calls to her grandparents in Tennessee, who read the headlines to them.

"The news stations were saying, if you don't live here, get off, you're taking our resources. But we couldn't get a flight out," Poag said. "The only way we could help was by giving away our canned goods and Oreos to nearby families when we left."

They moved their flight up one day – the earliest they could.

Meanwhile, Poag's aunt evacuated her house in Lahaina, taking only her phone and her purse.

The fires destroyed her house, and

she stayed at her church during the crisis. Now, the fires have forced her to relocate with relatives in California.

"She's abandoning her home, and she's one of the last of her generation to still live there. She grew up there with her family," Poag said. "But her house is gone, and she needs people around her."

On Sept. 13, Unity Council held a forum explaining how the fires tied into Maui's history of colonialism. Much of Maui's crop land has been taken for urban development, degraded or replanted with tall, flammable grasses – resulting in more fires.

The tourism industry has also caused a housing crisis in Hawaii because once-affordable housing is now bought and rented out by non-locals. The fires only made it worse.

"If we don't do something about the climate crisis now, fires like this one are going to become the norm," Poag said. "Let's not look back in 20 years and think there's more we could have done."



NEW YORK CITY, NY

María José Mejía, then a junior at Montclair Kimberley Academy in Montclair, New Jersey, took her French III final exam in an auditorium full of orange smoke. The ceiling was vaguely visible through the haze, and air made her tear up during the test.

Smoke from Canadian wildfires traveled as far as Washington D.C. throughout early June.

Drivers on the Garden State Parkway struggled to see past the median. Thick fog obstructed the view of cars directly ahead – even with hazard lights on.

"At first, I thought it was someone's barbeque or a building burning," Mejía said. "When I found out what it was, it was very concerning because we're far from the [Canadian] border."

Authorities primarily recommended avoiding outdoor activities, but smoke infiltrated indoor spaces through ventilation systems, causing inescapable discomfort for people

sensitive to air pollution.

Many residents chose to mask up, but it did little to filter out the smoke.

The worst effects were felt between June 6 and 9 when air quality reached up to 13 times more smoke micrograms than the EPA recommends for safe air quality.

Mejía went to her prom the night of June 8. In her pictures, the sky is ominous gray.

"We put on masks and ran in our prom dresses to avoid the smoke," Mejía said. "It was dystopian."

Three weeks later, the area was hit with another wave of smoke. Between June 5 and July 5, the New York Department of Environmental Conservation issued 15 air quality advisories concerning fine particle matter.

We put on masks and ran in our prom dresses to avoid the smoke. It was dystopian.

MARÍA JOSÉ MEJÍA

Houston has been in extreme drought since July 25, as reported by US Drought Monitor. In previous years, Harris County averaged 4.84 inches of rain in August and 42 inches between Jan. and Sept., but in 2023, it has received less than two inches of precipitation in August and 26 inches as of Oct. 1.

Extreme heat poses the deadliest natural hazard in the US, especially for children, people with underlying health risks and adults over the age of 65. In Harris County, the heat led to the deaths of 15 people this summer, including 67-year-old Victor Ramos, who died from heat stroke because he could not afford to fix his air conditioning.

For science teacher Gaby Del Bosque-Hernandez, the heat meant that she could not participate in many of her favorite activities, including visiting the Houston Arboretum, out of concern for her kids.

Each day before athletics practices, Director of Sports Medicine J.J. Roton uses a Wet Bulb Globe Temperature meter to measure the expected heat stress on the human body. Unlike the heat index, which only measures humidity and temperature, a WBGT measurement combines temperature, humidity, wind speed, sun angle and solar radiation to produce one comprehensive value.

As the WBGT rises, the athletics department takes greater precautions to protect athletes.

The School bases its heat policy on WBGT readings, requiring longer rest breaks and shorter practice times on days with higher

readings.

The School prohibits conditioning above a WBGT reading of 90 (typical measures are between 75 and 87 in the fall) and outdoor workouts. Anything above 92 would put unsafe levels of stress on athletes. For accuracy, Roton and other athletic trainers record the WBGT on each field, since materials like turf, grass and rubber attract different levels of sunlight.

While most varsity sports practice after the peak of the heat, Middle School athletics take place between 2:30 and 3:30, in direct sunlight.

“It was extremely hot and it drained your energy,” said Class 8 student Wyatt Greenberg, who takes Strengthening and Conditioning. “The football people were struggling because they had to be in full pads in the heat.”

The Middle School football team could not have practiced during their preseason or early season if not for Lamar Tower, which shaded the grass field where they practiced. The difference in the WBGT reading between the field, which was directly in the sun, and the shaded field area allowed them to practice.

While most varsity games occurred late enough in the day to avoid heat-related issues, JV coaches coordinated frequent water breaks with game officials and opposing coaches. Teams often took a break in the middle of a quarter to recover and hydrate.

“Everybody’s in the same situation,” Roton said. “They know it’s really hot, and they don’t want to do anything unsafe for the students.”

Across the athletic fields, the athletic department distributes troughs full of ice to chill drinking water, cold ice chests and wooden water bottle stations that were repurposed from the pandemic.

Roton noted that this is the first time extreme temperatures have significantly impacted fall sports, but it is nothing the athletics department is not prepared for. With military-grade technology and guidelines in accordance with the National Federation of State High School Associations, the sports medicine office is equipped to prevent heat-related illnesses.



The City of Bellaire is protecting its residents with weekly updates. Through Bellaire’s emergency notification system, the National Weather Service distributed information daily. They also made

general information posts to social media about personal protection from the heat and water conservation, as well as recommending services to track water usage.

According to Cheryl Bright, Bellaire’s Community Relations Administrator, Bellaire activated Stage Two of the Drought Contingency Plan in August, asking residents to “voluntarily limit the irrigation of landscaped areas.”

Bright and Roton both said that they will evolve their protocols if further heat-related issues emerge.

A heat dome is caused by warm ocean water, which surrounds Houston with high-pressure heat. In order to end the heat dome, Houston needed a low-pressure weather event that would push away the humid air. Higher temperature water intensifies climate events, so hurricanes will cause more damage to coastal areas and fires can dry out soil and vegetation, inflicting agricultural damage.

On Sept. 14, Houston experienced its first rainstorm since July 31. Despite the precipitation, Houston is still categorized as in extreme drought, and a third of Texas and portions of Louisiana and Mississippi are all currently in extreme or exceptional drought.

Anything that deals with the environment should not be political at all.

GABY DEL BOSQUE-HERNANDEZ

Wildfires have burned 120,000 acres of Texas land during the summer. In order to end the drought, Houston needs 18 inches of rain over a 30-day period.

The drought has also caused water shortages and harmed the state’s agriculture production. Central Texas reservoirs have reduced levels, like Lake Travis, which was 36% full in comparison to the standard 49% in August.

Farmers have experienced two consecutive rough years, as cotton farmers reported \$2 billion in crop losses in 2022. Livestock experienced dire conditions, and dry heat reduced both crop and livestock yields.

Despite the stress of the heat, a law that taxes EV owners went into effect Sept. 1. For junior Mateo Ramirez-Valentini, this is just one example of how Texas is failing its citizens.

“There’s a big prioritization of oil and gas over the environment,” said Ramirez-Valentini, a co-president of ECOS, “The burning of fossil fuels is definitely a big issue here.”

Similarly, Del Bosque-Hernandez says the politicization of environmental issues only exacerbates the problem. Instead, politicians should promote funding for environmental conservation and protective measures against natural disasters.

“Anything that deals with the environment should not be political at all,” she said. “If we rely on science to prepare for the future, it will save a lot of money in the long term.

Houston informs citizens on how to prepare for incoming natural catastrophes, but with more crises than ever, the city is ill prepared for its future as a hotspot for high temperatures and environmental disasters.

“There have already been so many once in a lifetime climate crises in my lifetime,” Mejia said. “It’s the new normal.”

Maui photo courtesy of The U.S. Coast Guard
Houston photo courtesy of Creative Commons
New York photo courtesy of Creative Commons

TOO HOT TO HANDLE:
A summer of record highs

109°

Hottest recorded temperature in Houston history, August 23

87.98°

Average summer temperature, the hottest in Houston’s history

39

Number of days this year with triple-digit temperatures

84°

Highest daily low this year, recorded August 22, 2023

18

Longest streak of days in Houston that reached over 100° and number of all-time highs set in 2023