

Using NewsHour Extra Feature Stories

STORY

Destructive Fires in Southern California Highlight Risks of Dry Season, 11/18/08

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/us/july-dec08/fires_11-18.html

Estimated Time: One 45-minute class period with possible extension

[Student Worksheet](#) (reading comprehension and discussion questions without answers)

PROCEDURE

1. WARM UP

Use initiating questions to introduce the topic and find out how much your students know.

2. MAIN ACTIVITY

Have students read NewsHour Extra's feature story and answer the reading comprehension and discussion questions on the student handout.

3. DISCUSSION

Use discussion questions to encourage students to think about how the issues outlined in the story affect their lives and express and debate different opinions.

INITIATING QUESTIONS

1. What is a wildfire?

2. What are some of the conditions that would make wildfires more likely?

3. What areas of the country might be vulnerable to wildfires?

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS – [Student Worksheet](#)

1. What happened in southern California this week?

ANSWER

Families are beginning to return to the burnt remains of homes and melted cars after firefighters gained control of wildfires that raged through southern California, forcing thousands of people to flee last week.

2. How much damage was done?

ANSWER

Around 1,000 residences burnt to the ground and an estimated 50,000 residents evacuated, according to Reuters.

3. Why is southern California particularly vulnerable to fires?

ANSWER

California is frequently hit by wildfires because of the dry climate, strong Santa Ana winds and real estate booms that have seen homes pop up in rural and wooded areas. Lightning striking parched hills in the southern California region is one of the ways fires often begin.

4. Where else have wildfires been a problem recently?

ANSWER

Last year more than 200 wild fires swept across parts of southeastern Europe, destroying homes and devouring woodland. In Greece, 65 people died because of the blazes.

5. How does climate change affect the possibility for wildfires?

ANSWER

Forestry experts say that the risk of wildfires increase as temperatures rise and periods of draught become longer. Earlier and warmer springs mean less snowpack, and an earlier snowmelt, allowing areas of California to dry out faster, lengthening the period of dangerous drought in the summer.

6. What is happening to California's snow season?

ANSWER

The peak time of melting snow is already about 10 to 15 days earlier in different parts of the West, reported the San Francisco Chronicle.

7. How might fires be contributing to climate change?

ANSWER

Some scientists also say the fires contribute to the climate problem due to the large amount of pollutants, carbon dioxide and methane released into the air.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (more research might be needed)

1. After reading about the fires in California would you ever want to live there? Should people be allowed to live in these areas that are at a high risk? Why or why not?

2. Who is responsible for keeping people safe from natural disasters?

3. Are there particular natural or weather related risks in your area? How can you prepare?

4. What should California's government be doing to reduce the risk of fires or increase its ability to respond to fires?

5. What are some of the other possible consequences of having longer, hotter summers?

Extension Activity

Have students write a 300-500 word essay on this topic providing clear examples. Send your completed editorial to NewsHour Extra (extra@newshour.org). Exceptional essays might be published on our Web site.