

# Historic heat wave in Pacific Northwest has killed hundreds in U.S. and Canada over the past week

By [Timothy Bella](#)

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d in a historic heat wave in the Pacific Northwest that has caused record-shattering temperatures in British Columbia, Oregon and Washington over the past week.

Authorities in the region are investigating the recent deaths, but have indicated that they are the result of a heat dome that has trapped hot air in the normally temperate area of Canada and the United States and caused thousands of emergency calls and hospital visits. Scientists and public officials have attributed the historic heat wave to climate change and the worst drought in modern history.

British Columbia has reported at least 486 “sudden and unexpected deaths” between Friday and Wednesday, chief coroner Lisa Lapointe said. The figure is hundreds more than the number of Canadians who usually die over a five-day period, she told [the Associated Press](#).

“While it is too early to say with certainty how many of these deaths are heat related, it is believed likely that the significant increase in deaths reported is attributable to the extreme weather,” Lapointe said in a statement.

Ninety-eight of the deaths happened in Vancouver, where two-thirds of the victims were 70 or older, police said on [Twitter](#). Vancouver authorities noted that many of the region’s homes, as with many houses in the Pacific Northwest, do not have air-conditioning, which has left residents vulnerable to the heat.

“Vancouver has never experienced heat like this, and sadly dozens of people are dying because of it,” Vancouver Police Sgt. Steve Addison said in a news release. “Our officers are stretched thin, but we’re still doing everything we can to keep people safe.”

Lytton, B.C., about 160 miles north of Vancouver, set heat records three days in a row. The village’s heat wave culminated Monday with the temperature reaching 121, the highest recorded in the country as well as the highest north of the 50th parallel. Lytton was forced to evacuate Wednesday after flames caused by the heat engulfed the village, and Mayor Jan Polderman said that [“the whole town is on fire.”](#)

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau described the heat wave, which has killed hundreds and brought an increased risk of wildfires, as “unprecedented.”

In Oregon, 63 people have died since Friday, said the state medical examiner’s office, with police noting that a preliminary investigation suggested that the deaths “may be associated with the Pacific Northwest heat wave.” Temperatures in the state topped out at 117 this week.

At least 45 of the 63 heat-related deaths were reported in the state’s largest county, Multnomah, which includes Portland. The city of Portland broke its high-temperature record twice over the past week, most recently on Sunday,

when it hit 112, according to the World Meteorological Organization. Those who died in the county ranged in age from 44 to 97, and many of them had underlying health conditions, the Multnomah County medical examiner said in a [news release](#). The 45 deaths were because of hyperthermia, the county coroner said — a number that was significantly higher than the 12 total between 2017 and 2019.

“This was a true health crisis that has underscored how deadly an extreme heat wave can be, especially to otherwise vulnerable people,” Multnomah County Health Officer Jennifer Vines said. “I know many county residents were looking out for each other and am deeply saddened by this initial death toll. As our summers continue to get warmer, I suspect we will face this kind of event again.”

Multnomah County spokesperson Julie Sullivan-Springhetti told [the Oregonian](#) that the county received a record-breaking 491 calls for emergency medical assistance Monday.

“We were sounding the alarm every day and warning the community that this heat wave was deadly,” she said.

In Washington state, at least 20 people have died because of heat, a number that officials said was expected to increase. Thirteen of the 20 died in King County, which includes Seattle, the county coroner said. Seattle also has broken its single-day heat record twice in the past week, most recently Monday, when the temperature soared to 107, the World Meteorological Organization said.

Several people died of heatstroke in Snohomish County, while others in the western part of the state were found dead in their apartments because of [heat-related stress](#), officials said. The heat has become so fierce in Spokane, on the state’s eastern border, that the power company Avista Utilities had to impose rolling blackouts in an effort to limit outages to one hour for each customer.

At Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, Steve Mitchell, the medical director of the emergency department, compared the influx of people to what it was like during the early days of the [coronavirus pandemic](#) last year.

“It felt very much like what happened in the initial days of trying to deal with the original outbreak [of the virus] at the Life Care Center in Kirkland,” Mitchell told [the Seattle Times](#). “We got to the point where facilities were struggling with basic equipment, like ventilators.”

The increased and prolonged temperatures have also affected other parts of the United States, such as Arizona, where temperatures topped 118 this month and resulted in scores of deaths that are suspected to have been related to the heat.

President Biden on Wednesday said [climate change](#) was driving the heat as well as increasing the risk of wildfires.

“The extreme heat we’re seeing in the West is not only a risk amplifier for wildfires, it’s a threat in and of itself,” he said. “People are hurting. It’s more dangerous for kids to play outside. Roads are buckling under the heat. ... We need people to check on their neighbors, especially seniors who may need a helping hand.”

White House national climate adviser Gina McCarthy echoed the president’s sentiments on climate change’s role in the weather, telling [CNN](#) on Thursday that the extreme heat is “the new norm.”

“We have to adjust to this as best we can, but frankly we have to start thinking about how our future looks,” she said.

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