

Climate Groups Use Crowdfunding To Help California Wildfire Victims

With seed money from billionaire Tom Steyer, one fund seeks donations to help those hurt by climate change.

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By Mollie Reily



A firefighter douses flames from a backfire while battling the Butte fire near San Andreas, California, on Sept. 12. Wildfires have spread rapidly through northern California, destroying hundreds of homes, forcing thousands of people to flee and injuring four firefighters.

SAN FRANCISCO -- A coalition of climate groups is crowdfunding to help Californians affected by the state's historic drought and devastating wildfires.

The California Drought Relief Fund, which launched late last month, asks the public to help provide relief for communities hurt by the lack of rainfall over the last three years. The fund started with \$100,000 in seed money from billionaire climate activist Tom Steyer and his wife, philanthropist Kat Taylor, and aims to raise an additional \$150,000 from crowd-funded donations. (Steyer launched a similar campaign, the Climate Relief Fund, on a national scale last year.)

"From devastating drought to dangerous wildfires, California's families are already feeling the impacts of climate change," Steyer said in a statement about the fund's launch. "As

Californians, we stand ready to lend a hand to our friends and neighbors. The California Drought Relief Fund will provide critical assistance to communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis. Their struggles remind us of our moral responsibility to protect our communities while we address the cause of the climate crisis and build a better future for our children."

The group has raised about \$25,000, with an uptick in the last week as out-of-control wildfires raged across Northern California.

Wildfires aren't unusual during California's typically hot, dry summers. With 92 percent of the state experiencing severe drought, the Golden State is now having what officials have deemed its worst wildfire season ever. According to state data, there have been 5,225 wildfires in 2015 -- 1,583 more than the average over the last five years.

Two of the season's largest and most destructive wildfires broke out last week: the Valley Fire, which has burned 67,000 acres in Lake, Napa and Sonoma counties, and the Butte Fire, which has scorched more than 71,000 acres in Amador and Calaveras counties. Those fires are currently 15 percent and 37 percent contained, respectively.

Money from the fundraising is already being put to use in communities affected by the Valley and Butte fires. One of the three groups backed by the fund is the California Fire Foundation, a nonprofit that provides aid to firefighters as well as to communities. The foundation purchases gift cards to give to fire crews, who in turn can distribute them to people who have lost their homes or have been displaced.



"It's supplying aid to victims right there on the spot to get them a hot meal, some clothes, something to carry them through a tough night," foundation spokesman Carroll Wills said. "It's a way to offer immediate assistance on the worst day of their lives."

The foundation also offers aid to the families of fallen firefighters, provides emergency preparation kits for the elderly and helps spread fire safety awareness to Spanish and Vietnamese-speaking communities.

The drought relief fund is backing two organizations in California's Central Valley, where taps have run dry in some communities. One of the groups, Self Help Enterprises, installs

temporary water tanks and helps individuals connect to municipal water supplies. The other, the Environmental Coalition for Water Justice, provides bottled water in areas where the water is no longer safe to drink.

Backed by 350.org, Courage Campaign and other groups hoping to spur action on global warming, the Drought Relief Fund also hopes to raise awareness of climate change and its implications.

"Warmer climate is making everything drier, and has made wildfires worse," Climate Relief Fund project director Camron Assadi said.

Recent studies have linked the drought to rising temperatures. A report released last month found that global warming has worsened the effects of California's drought by quickening moisture loss in already dry soil and trees. In March, another study found that climate change has created conditions that increased the likelihood of severe drought.