

Massive wildfires grow across Southern California

By Dan Conway
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Massive wildfires, fueled by fast winds, spread throughout Southern California on Tuesday and Wednesday, leading to mass evacuations, power outages and property destruction. Already limited firefighting resources have been stretched to the limit. Los Angeles Fire Chief Ralph Terrazas even warned that this would cause limited response to 911 emergency calls throughout the duration of the fires.

The National Weather Service has reported that continued winds and low humidity would keep the fires burning until at least the end of the week.

Severe drought over the past six years has made conditions ripe for wildfires of this magnitude. Primarily due to manmade climate change, the period between late 2011 and 2014 was the driest on record in the state of California. Cal Fire Deputy Chief Scott McLean noted in an interview Tuesday with ABC7 News, “Our—if you want to call it—season, has been elongated by upwards of 0-50 days over the last 50 years and will continue to do so.”

After six years of drought, significant rains resumed in the winter of 2016 and 2017. These conditions led to widespread growth of underbrush. The new vegetation shriveled and died during the summer of 2017, the hottest on record, creating prime conditions for devastating wildfires.

The most recent of the Southern California fires started in the upscale neighborhood of Bel Air on Wednesday morning, shutting down the 405 freeway, the main traffic artery on the western side of Los Angeles. It also threatened two of the city’s principal museums, the Getty Center Art Museum and Skirball Cultural Center. As of 11:00 am on Wednesday, the fire had burned through 150 acres and destroyed six homes. Power outages affected nearly 1,000 customers along with the nearby campus of the University of

California Los Angeles, UCLA. Classes were canceled on Wednesday as a result.

A fire in the city of Santa Clarita began late Tuesday afternoon, consuming more than 7,000 acres. Some 1,300 households were ordered to evacuate along with several area schools. The fire was only five percent contained as of 4:00 pm Wednesday, according to Los Angeles County fire officials.

Also on Tuesday, nearly 100,000 people were under evacuation orders as a result of the Creek Fire near the towns of Sylmar and Lake View Terrace north of Los Angeles.

Winds fueling the Creek Fire were so fast that embers crossed and ignited brush south of the 210 Freeway, separating the more sparsely populated San Gabriel Mountain Foothills from denser areas closer to the city of Los Angeles. As of this writing, the fire has destroyed at least 30 homes and scorched nearly 11,400 acres.

That fire is still zero percent contained and has caused the death of at least 30 horses at a ranch in Sylmar. At least 2,500 homes are still under threat, according to LA County fire inspector Gustavo Medina.

Another blaze broke out to the east near the campus of California State University, San Bernardino, causing two people to be hospitalized with severe burns. The fire, called the Little Mountain Fire, broke out at 12:28 pm Tuesday and burned 30 acres in less than 2 hours. “I expect that number to grow,” said San Bernardino County Fire spokesman Eric Sherwin at the time. “We are at zero percent containment.”

The largest of all fires this week, however, was the Thomas Fire in Ventura County, which is the largest experienced in the Southern California region thus far this year. At least 150 structures, including at least one

large apartment complex and a psychiatric facility, were burned to the ground as the fire forced more than 27,000 people to evacuate.

As of this writing, more than 90,000 acres had been burned by the fire. According to fire officials, at its peak the Thomas Fire was spreading at a rate of 50 acres every minute as high winds deluged the area with fiery embers.

The high “Santa Ana” winds, a regular occurrence in the Southern California area at this time of year, are expected to continue into Thursday, leaving the likelihood of greater damage extremely high. The Santa Ana winds also complicate fire suppression efforts, as fixed wing aircraft and helicopters are unable to dump water and other fire retardants on the affected areas either for safety reasons or because accurate dispersal becomes nearly impossible. Forecasters are predicting wind gusts of up to 80 miles per hour on Thursday.

The National Weather Service has declared the fires part of the “strongest and longest duration Santa Ana wind event we have seen so far this season.”

The fires arrive less than two months after October’s Wine Country fires in Northern California. At the time, seven major wildfires destroyed 8,889 structures and led to 44 deaths.

Increasing temperatures coupled with funding cuts have left forestry services around the country woefully unprepared to deal with the rising danger.

Unlike the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which can use emergency funds for hurricane or tornado response, the US Forestry Service must tap into other portions of its own budget—including fire prevention activities—when it runs out of firefighting funds. In 2016, the Forest Service spent more than half of its budget on firefighting, compared to 16 percent in 1995.

While most fires in California start on state or private land, the US Forest Service provided 154 of the 170 external fire engines used in the Wine Country fires. Cal Fire Director Ken Pimlott recently noted the extreme importance of federal aid in fighting the fires. “If they [US Forestry Service] don’t have adequate funding to ensure their wildland fire program is fully supported, we don’t have the ability to reach out to them to get mutual aid and assistance at the same capacity.”

The Trump administration is working to ensure that

the state of California is starved of funding for wildfire disasters. Of the \$44 billion requested by the White House in supplemental disaster aid, none will go towards the victims of the California wildfires.

Such callous disregard for the victims of natural disasters is not limited to the Trump Administration. It is a bipartisan policy, as evinced by the administration of California Governor Jerry Brown, who is being floated as a possible contender for the 2020 Democratic Party presidential nomination.

After Brown declared an end to the state’s drought in April of this year, the state’s budget only included a mere \$2 million to help local agencies remove dead trees and underbrush. Similarly, funding for the state’s disaster assistance fund dropped from \$52.7 million to \$8.5 million.

Despite the fact that California is home to more billionaires than any other single state in the country, no additional funds can be expected to be forthcoming. Even before the Northern California fires started last October, Cal Fire had already used \$250 million of its \$426.9 million emergency fund.

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