

# California's Apple Fire burns 20,000 acres, forces thousands from their homes

By Peter Ross  
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A massive fire broke out Friday afternoon in a rural area 75 miles southeast of Los Angeles. Three potential arson fires rapidly merged and spread through more than 1,900 acres Friday night, forcing hundreds of residents of Cherry Valley, Banning Bluff, and other nearby communities to evacuate. Extreme temperatures, low humidity and high winds drove the fire deep into the San Bernardino National Forest and up the southern face of the San Gorgonio Mountains over the weekend.

Firefighters struggled to slow the aggressive spread of the fire over the rugged and inaccessible terrain, and by Monday morning the fire had burned more than 26,000 acres (about 41 square miles) and was only 5 percent contained. More than 1,300 firefighters have been assigned to the fire, along with hundreds of fire engines, nine helicopters and two air tankers. "It is steep terrain, rugged terrain," Captain Fernando Herrera of Cal Fire told the Palm Springs *Desert Sun*. "We rely a lot on the aircraft to do the work during the day."

The eastern flank of the fire has already moved into the western section of the Morongo Reservation, home to over 3,500 Mission Indians. In the west, the fire has spread into San Bernardino County, threatening the Forest Falls community in the national forest, and forcing mandatory evacuations for the town of Oak Glen.

Strong westerly winds and high temperatures prevailed on Monday, amid an extended heat wave across the region. "Given the fuel, given the weather, given the topography and where this is going, this fire is not going to stop tonight, it's going to keep going," Lisa Cox, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Forest Service told reporters.

The fire has produced massive smoke columns

visible throughout much of Southern California, which have formed pyrocumulus clouds that have generated their own strong winds. Plumes of smoke have been swept as far as Las Vegas and central Arizona. The South Coast Air Quality Management District has issued air quality advisories for much of the Inland Empire and Los Angeles metropolitan areas. Unsafe smoke levels are of special concern for the sick and elderly, and are known to increase the severity of COVID-19, of which there are almost 40,000 active cases in Los Angeles County alone.

No deaths or injuries have been reported from Apple Fire, but evacuation orders have so far affected over 8,000 people from more than 2,600 residences. Among those who had to evacuate was Cherry Valley resident Rick Stewart, 67, who evacuated with his wife and three grandchildren as the fire approached his house. "I was terrified. You have no idea the amount of heat that came off that. Literally burning your face," Stewart told the *Desert Sun*.

An evacuation shelter has been set up at a high school in the town of Beaumont, but only a small number of evacuees have reportedly come to the shelter. Only 32 evacuees stayed in Red Cross-provided hotel lodging Saturday night. "Folks not taking advantage of it over concerns about COVID-19, we have measures in place. We planned for this months ahead," Cal Fire's Captain Fernando Herrera explained to CBS News.

The low turnout at the evacuation shelter is doubtlessly due to a pervasive sentiment of distrust for the way state and federal authorities have handled the pandemic: the policies of the political establishment are correctly perceived as criminally indifferent to the safety of the broad population and many fear that staying in emergency shelters will increase their risk of contracting the deadly coronavirus.

A string of record-breaking wildfires has torn across California since 2017, including the Ranch Fire, the largest in the state's history, and the Camp Fire, which completely destroyed the town of Paradise. Despite the growing danger of wildfires, the state has systematically cut funding for social infrastructure, including firefighting and wildfire prevention, and has increasingly relied on thousands of low-paid prison inmates to work as firefighting "hand crews."

Due to COVID-19—which has hit California's prisons particularly hard—less than half of these crews will be available during the 2020 fire season. To compensate, California lawmakers have set aside \$85.6 million to hire additional firefighters, even as they have cut firefighters' salaries by 10 percent, and slashed \$680 million from the state budget for environmental protection.

Even as thousands of people were forced from their homes in yet another catastrophic fire under conditions of a historic pandemic, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom made a television appearance Monday afternoon to congratulate his administration for "encouraging signs" in the fight against COVID-19. Meanwhile, the state is posting death rates which are 25 percent higher than in April.

Currently, there are more than 150,000 homeless people in California, and tens of thousands more are out of work and at risk of eviction as extended federal unemployment benefits were allowed by Congress to expire at the end of last month. To this number must be added the tens of thousands whose homes and lives are endangered by the constant threat of wildfires, while an indifferent ruling elite looks on.

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