

Wildfires engulf Southern California

As many as 1 million flee as almost 500,000 acres burn

Kevin Mitchell, Andrea Peters
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Massive wildfires have engulfed large swaths of southern California in the US, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes and seek refuge in stadiums and other safe locations. As of the writing of this report, state officials and news agencies estimate that between 700,000 and 1,000,000 people have been forced to evacuate as a result of fires that began on Sunday.

The natural disaster prompted California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to declare a state of emergency in seven counties all the way from Santa Barbara, which is about 150 miles north of Los Angeles, to San Diego, about 150 miles south of LA. An estimated 500,000 acres—an area two times larger than New York City—have gone up in flames.

In San Diego County alone, which is located near the US border with Mexico, officials ordered residents in approximately 346,000 homes to evacuate for their safety. The magnitude of the civilian evacuation is the largest in the United States since the Civil War.

Thousands of homes and buildings have been laid waste, sending large amounts of smoke and ash into the atmosphere. Thus far, there have been six fire- and evacuation-related fatalities reported, although those numbers may rise once emergency personnel are able to reach areas currently engulfed in flames. Six firefighters have been hospitalized.

At least 16 separate fires have been reported as of Monday, with the most ferocious located in Aqua Dulce, a relatively wealthy area north of Los Angeles. Those forcing the mass evacuations in San Diego County are the Witch, McCoy, and Coronado Hills fires. All of the fires are continuing to spread, with state officials saying that containment will not be possible for many more days.

In an expression of the desperate character of the situation, San Diego Fire Captain Kirk Humphries told the Associated Press on Tuesday, “If it’s this big and blowing with as much wind as it’s got, it’ll go all the way to the ocean before it stops.”

Many areas have been abandoned to the flames. Some local residents have reported that fire crews have shown up only many hours after flames grew dangerously close to their residences. In other instances, no emergency services responded at all. There are simply no resources available.

It is currently the region’s traditional fire season. This typically fire-prone period has been exacerbated by unusual ecological conditions in southern California’s desert and semi-desert climate. The 2007 fire season is the driest on record. This dangerous situation has been made worse by a seasonal weather phenomenon known as the Santa Ana Winds, which can reach 75 miles per hour

or more.

The winds have carried hot embers across southern California, frustrating attempts by firefighters to form fire lines and limiting their ability to employ aerial methods against the flames. High temperatures and wind speeds through Tuesday fanned the flames. A break in the weather, which is expected to occur on Wednesday, may improve the situation slightly.

At least one of the fires in Orange County, south of Los Angeles, was caused by arson, while the fire in Malibu, an area just north of Los Angeles, is believed to have been the result of downed power lines.

The size and scope of the recent fires is expected to eclipse the 2003 Cedar Fire in southern California, which burned 750,000 acres of countryside and killed 20 people. The destruction in property from that fire was estimated at \$2 billion.

Additional firefighters have been called from the Bay Area, Lake Tahoe, and Nevada. The US Forest Service has mobilized 80 engines from Colorado, Wyoming, Arizona and New Mexico to aid overwhelmed firefighters in Southern California.

Chief Bill Metcalf, San Diego county area fire coordinator, said, “This is worse than many of us imagined. We’re seeing 100 to 200 feet flame lengths and truly explosive fire behavior.”

Roads throughout southern California are shut down or clogged with fleeing residents, including many miles of the region’s major arteries such as portions of Route 1, otherwise known as the Pacific Coast Highway, and Interstates 5 and 15. This has caused a major traffic crisis throughout the area.

The Border Patrol has said that immigrants who had crossed into California from Mexico may be trapped in the Harris fire, which is on the US-Mexico border. Tuesday morning, a report on KCRW, a local National Public Radio station in the Los Angeles area, reported that 50 undocumented immigrants had turned themselves into the Border Patrol for fear of their lives because of the fires.

As with other natural disasters, the California fires are exposing the inadequate and strained character of social infrastructure in the US.

According to an article published on Tuesday in the *Los Angeles Times*, since 2003, when the region was devastated by wildfires, only one new fire station has been built, and many of the county’s fire departments are chronically under-funded and understaffed. Aside from more air support, an automated call system, and a better communications system, little progress has been made in improving the fire-fighting infrastructure and equipment over the

past four years.

Some firefighters have been diverted to deal with the social crisis the fires have caused. The *Ventura County Star* reported on Tuesday that an engine company from San Diego, including five fire trucks and firefighters, was recalled en route to fight a fire last Sunday in order to help with massive evacuations in the area. “Rarely do we have this much going on,” Bill Nash, a Ventura County Fire Department spokesman, told the newspaper. “Virtually the entire Southern California area is all out of firefighters,” he said.

Evacuation centers have been set up in locales across the region, although there has been no preparation to handle a “refugee” crisis, as one newspaper referred to it, of this scale. “It’s basically a mass migration here in San Diego County”, said Luis Monteagudo, a spokesman for the county’s emergency effort.

Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego has been converted into an emergency relief center, taking in 10,000 displaced people. Officials there were completely unprepared for the more than 500 elderly and sick persons transported to the evacuation center. Nursing home patients and evacuees from hospitals in the northern part of San Diego are some of the most vulnerable people arriving at the various refugee locations.

The Del Mar Fairgrounds, north of San Diego, has also turned into an evacuation center, along with many high schools and senior centers. At the Del Mar racetrack, located on the Fairgrounds, at least 2,000 people and 2,500 animals were taken in by Monday evening. Kina Paegert, public information officer for Del Mar Fairgrounds, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “When we started this morning we had five mattresses. We were prepared for animals. We weren’t prepared for this.”

According to the newspaper report, last night the facility scrounged up only 100 mattresses for the 2,000 people staying there, leaving many elderly and ill to sleep on the floor. The *Los Angeles Times* further noted, “Some frail patients had bits of white masking tape on their foreheads, listing various medical conditions like ‘Depression’ and ‘Diabetes.’”

These conditions certainly recall the images of thousands of people holed up in the New Orleans Superdome in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

As of Monday, the Red Cross opened five shelters and federal and military authorities have opened another 10. Only 1,500 cots were available at the Red Cross shelters, which Mayor of San Diego Jerry Sanders said are “maxed out.”

Nearly every hotel in San Diego County and other affected areas is booked and many hotels slated to serve as emergency shelters had to be evacuated because of approaching flames.

The region’s air quality has vastly deteriorated since the fires began, prompting health officials to issue a warning throughout Southern California urging the young, the elderly, and those with breathing difficulties to remain indoors. The wildfires have produced dust and particulates that are unhealthy to breathe in general and particularly dangerous for those with pre-existing medical conditions like emphysema, asthma, heart disease, and lung disease.

On Monday, White House press secretary Dana Perino ruled out a presidential stop in the region, calling it “very premature.” The

President has since reversed course, no doubt in part due to the memories of the public relations debacle created by government indifference to the Hurricane Katrina disaster. He is expected to visit the area on Thursday.

Whatever platitudes Bush is sure to issue, it can be predicted from the outset that no genuine aid or long-term relief will be offered to the tens of thousands of people whose homes will be lost and lives irrevocably affected as a result of this event, and nothing will be done to address the underlying decay of social infrastructure in the US.

The tragedy unfolding in Southern California is not simply the result of natural conditions. It is the product also of a lack of preparation for an entirely foreseeable, if extraordinary, set of events. The extreme fire dangers caused by supremely dry conditions in California, which has been in the grip of a severe drought, have been known for months.

The Santa Ana winds are a yearly and entirely predictable meteorological phenomenon, which contribute to the very existence of a “fire season” in Southern California.

In April of this year, San Diego County emergency services had planned optimistically to have 670 shelters established for 70,000 people in anticipation of the fire season. The paucity of this level of preparedness in the face of the current crisis is staggering. But it is not unexplainable. It is the product of a socio-economic system in which the public infrastructure—through years of budget cuts, the shedding of services, and the erosion of emergency equipment—has been abandoned in the interests of tax cuts for the wealthy and big business.

The severity of the current conditions is unusual, but even that is not something that can be considered independent of social relations. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, bringing together the views of scientists across the world, has warned of increased fire risks due to global warming. Parts of the southern US are in the midst of the severest drought on record, compounded by a decade of record temperatures.

Despite growing indications of the enormous impact of global warming, no serious measures have been implemented to halt or reverse the phenomenon—another consequence of the subordination of all social and ecological concerns to the pursuit of profit.

The massive boom in housing in Southern California that has occurred over the past ten years has happened in many of those locations now being destroyed by fires. While it is too early to say for certain, the obvious question emerges as to whether these areas are environmentally safe for human habitation at all.

The provision of housing for the state’s growing population is not decided by teams of developers taking into a consideration a wide array of environmental factors—in particular, the region’s high fire danger—but rather by multi-million dollar home-building corporations whose aim is to build, sell, and turn a profit.



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