

Wildfires cause massive destruction in Southern California

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Thousands of residents were forced to flee their homes as wildfires continued to rage across Southern California last Friday night.

The fires were aggravated by a combination of low humidity, high winds, and high temperatures in Southern California. Indeed, the temperatures experienced in Los Angeles, which reached a high of 93 degrees Fahrenheit on Saturday, were among the highest ever recorded for the city during the month of November.

At the time of this writing, the fires have burned more than 64 square miles (or 41,000 acres) and have thus far destroyed over 1,000 houses, mobile homes and apartments. A high school in the city of Brea was also among the many buildings destroyed.

White ash and smoke have been strewn as far away as 25 miles away from the fires, leading emergency authorities to advise that residents far from the fires remain in their homes due to the extremely poor air quality.

More than 484 homes burned to the ground in a trailer park of 600 homes in the town of Sylmar, the largest number of homes to be lost to fire in the history of Los Angeles. According to press reports, high winds blasted 50-foot flames horizontally through the grounds of the park, and poor water pressure hindered the efforts of firefighters trying to subdue the blaze.

The *New York Times* noted Monday that firefighters “complained that the development had only one exit and entrance, which made it difficult to move fire crews in as residents tried to move out.” The fire spread so quickly that firefighters themselves were forced to flee, leaving their equipment behind.

After searching the incinerated grounds with cadaver dogs, officials have stated that all residents likely made it out before the fire blew through the park, although as of this writing less than half of the park’s residents had been contacted. The vast majority of the community’s residents lost virtually all of their belongings.

The strength of the fire was augmented by the close positioning and housing material of the trailers within the park. Many of the mobile homes lacked fire-retardant material in their construction,

causing them to ignite much more easily than other buildings. Older trailers with attic vents allowed the fire to spread into the attic areas, and the proximity of units enabled the fire to spread swiftly from one home to another.

Speaking at a news conference staged near the site of the disaster, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger said the fire made it clear that mobile homes should be required to use more fire-resistant materials. “The fire ran through the mobile homes so fast,” he told the press. “Like matches, they caught fire, one right after the other.”

Schwarzenegger’s observation raises an obvious question: why weren’t basic regulatory safeguards on mobile home construction and placement already in place in a region well known for fires? In fact, such standards have long been foregone for the benefit of the prefabricated home industry and trailer park landlords, at the expense of the poorest section of the working class renters.

The “Sayre Fire” in Sylmar, responsible for the destruction of the trailer park, began after the spreading of the so-called “Tea Fire” in Santa Barbara County—which itself burned more than 210 homes last week. Over 1,000 firefighting personnel have responded to the Sayre blaze; the fire is now estimated to be only 40 percent contained.

Nearby at the Olive View-UCLA Medical Center, a power failure caused a two-hour blackout prompting an evacuation of 27 patients, including newborn infants and pregnant mothers. One of the hospital staff wrote in an email published in part in the *Los Angeles Times*, “I saw . . . nurses rush into the ER with newborns carried in a kangaroo-like pouch for transport out. . . . It took a team of 8 to carry [one] patient on a stretcher down flights of stairs through 4 floors . . . with just our flashlights for visualization. She made it to Huntington hospital safely.”

It is still unclear how the Olive View Hospital’s emergency generators, originally designed for earthquakes, could have failed, but a combination of heat and smoke could have disabled the air pump. State law requires hospitals to resume lighting and electricity 10 seconds after a normal power outage, and keep the power running for 24 hours. Even though the critical pump was tested last Wednesday, officials are baffled as to how it could have

failed during a real emergency.

Fires also broke out in the neighboring counties of Orange and Riverside, leading Governor Schwarzenegger to declare a state of emergency.

More than 26,500 have been ordered to evacuate from their homes, and despite calmer winds, 3500 homes are still at risk due to high temperatures and extremely low humidity. Meteorologists forecast that these conditions will last until at least Tuesday.

Despite the regularity of fires in the region, the unplanned character of the state's emergency preparation finds form in a chaotic, mandatory, eleventh-hour evacuation order. For example, one 91-year-old Orange County resident interviewed by the Reuters News Agency reported that she had been given five minutes to evacuate her home and was told that she'd have to drive herself out despite the fact that she had recently had eye surgery.

Mickey Hansen, an OC Fire Authority safety officer told the *OC Register*, "We just started losing homes. We didn't have enough units." At the time flames broke out they only had nine firefighting units in the neighborhood. Soon the fire outran the emergency call for extra reinforcements. "There were just so many fires," Hansen said, "there wasn't enough to go around."

In Yorba Linda, a pump in the water supply broke after fire crews tapped the system to subdue blazes in the district. A replacement part was brought in from Laguna Beach, but even then the water system couldn't keep up with the flames, some of which fire crews said were moving at more than 100 feet per minute. According to a report Saturday in the *OC Register*, after the pump was replaced the water pressure was too low to contend with fires, and water was undrinkable throughout the district.

In the coming days, a much more detailed picture of the wildfires will surely emerge. Firefighters and emergency personnel are working heroically to contain the fires with some working many hours at a time under horrible conditions with no pause. The news media will undoubtedly laud such sacrifices in order to obscure larger political issues involved.

High temperatures and high winds are a common meteorological feature of Southern California during the autumn months. The phenomenon of global warming has become a major factor in the increased frequency and severity of wildfires. To date, the ten busiest fire seasons in US history occurred between the years 1999 and 2007, and the record high temperature last Saturday was a major contributor to the severity of the current fires.

In the last decade, wildfires have consumed an average of 7.24 million acres a year, twice the average of the 1990s. Last year's fires burned more than 9 million acres, and 2008's figure is expected to match that. Global warming has exacerbated these regular ecological phenomena into a nightmare scenario where

fires commence earlier in the summer, as forests and grasses become drier.

Most of the homes being constructed in California are cheaply made and situated in especially fire-prone areas. This is not the fault of the residents, but real estate developers seeking to extract more profits in home sales out of cheaper acreage, regardless of the threat of fires. In fact, according to a University of Wisconsin study, from 1990 to 2000, more than 61 percent of the homes built in California, Oregon, or Washington (more than 1 million houses), were constructed in or at the edge of wildfire-prone lands.

Firefighters and other first responders are woefully underfunded with many lacking adequate personnel and equipment. During the Orange County fire of October 2007, it was revealed that local fire crews—responsible for fighting the fiercest wildfires in the entire US on a yearly basis—employed fire engines that were staffed below national standards.

It should also be noted that much of the fire-fighting budget in the US has been handed over to private interests. Almost 60 percent of the Forest Service's wildfire expenditures went to the private sector last year.

The class polarity of American society becomes starkly clear in the government's response to natural disasters such as that currently plaguing the state of California. In a country which spends billions of dollars a day fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; spends \$850 billion to bail out the banking executives who have already generated obscene profits off the misery of millions; and in a state which is an economic powerhouse in its own right, home to nearly 20 percent of the world's billionaires, hundreds of working class homes are allowed to be destroyed each year.



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