

Wildfires ravage central and southern California

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Soaring temperatures across the western United States have given rise to a string of massive wildfires this past week. More than 120,000 acres (485 square kilometers) have burned in the state of California alone, with thousands forced to flee their homes.

Fire officials estimate that it will take at least another two weeks before the fires in California can be contained. Despite the absence of high winds, which are typically the primary factor in the quick spread of wildfires, the fires have nonetheless grown massively. They have been fueled by the high temperatures and extremely dry vegetation due to the state's ongoing three-year drought.

The "Station fire" alone, which doubled in size on Sunday night, has consumed more than 100,000 acres in the Los Angeles National Forest, leading to the evacuation of more than 6,600 homes. Twenty-one homes have thus far been destroyed by the Station fire, and 23 cabins have been destroyed in the forest's Big Tujunga Canyon recreation area.

Fire officials estimate that the fire is only 5 percent contained at this point and worry that winds may start to increase in the coming days, making the fire what meteorologists estimate could be the largest wildfire in California history. The relatively stagnant air at present, while not directly contributing to the spread of the fire, makes conditions difficult for helicopters and planes to drop water and other fire retardants on the blaze due to extremely poor visibility within massive smoke clouds that won't dissipate.

Local air quality has also become extremely hazardous, with residents warned to either stay indoors or only venture out of doors for short periods of time.

Areas of downtown Los Angeles, though far removed from the fire, have been completely covered by a fine layer of ash.

The Station fire is now expected to reach and overcome the summit of Mount Wilson, which contains 22 television stations along with numerous radio and cell phone transmitters. Firefighters coated the communications equipment with fire retardant chemicals before leaving the area after determining that it was simply too dangerous to remain.

The fires on Mount Wilson also threaten the 104-year-old Wilson Observatory, the site where the astronomer Edwin Hubble most famously discovered the existence of other galaxies in the universe in addition to the Milky Way. Soon after, Hubble used the observatory's Hooker telescope to discover the speeds at which galaxies traveled away from one another, which became a key experimental support for the Big Bang theory of the universe. Albert Einstein also once visited the Observatory and spent several nights at one of the cabins that may soon be obliterated.

While the Station fire has been the largest, the fire that has caused the most extensive property damage thus far has been the 49er Fire in Central California, burning more than 60 homes in the historic gold rush town of Auburn. The Auburn fire moved through the area extremely quickly, in one case leveling a whole residential block in a matter of minutes. Town resident Kenny James exclaimed, "Our house is gone. The whole block has been leveled—our block."

The current California state budget crisis has ripped apart funding for fire protection services, particularly for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, also known as Cal Fire. The agency's funds were cut by more than \$27 million during the current fiscal year alone. Additionally, the state

recently refused to renew a three-year contract to use the massive DC-10 fire retardant bomber, widely considered to be the single most effective piece of firefighting equipment available.

In an interview with the internet-based Fire Department Network News, Rick Hatton, a managing partner with 10 Tanker Air Carrier said that he couldn't understand the decision to cancel the contract. "We were surprised as were the professionals at Cal Fire. To cut off immediate access to a proven aerial firefighting resource, ten times more efficient than California's other firefighting planes, is the wrong way to go."

State officials are currently claiming that firefighters have had sufficient means to fight the current wildfires in spite of the fire's continued advances. Most recently however, the state has been compelled to hastily negotiate a contract over what were most likely extortionate terms for a single DC-10, which didn't make its first appearance until Saturday. A second DC-10 will be available to the state on a "pay as you go" basis but won't be available until Tuesday. The urgency of obtaining the DC-10s was in part due to the recent mechanical failure of the US Forestry Service's Martin Mars Air Tanker, also known as the "super scooper," making it unable to fight the current fires.

Of the \$27 million in cuts made to Cal Fire, \$17 million has been cut from vehicle maintenance and replacement budgets, forcing firefighters to use old, and in many cases hazardous vehicles and equipment.

Two firefighters have already lost their lives in the city of Acton when their engine fell down a mountainside. While officials have given no further details of the incident, it does raise concerns related to budget reductions in Cal Fire and other organizations.

Additionally, the devastating effect that the fires have on homeowners will only be compounded by recent actions taken by the insurance industry.

This past year, insurance companies won approval from state regulators to increase home insurance premiums by 4 to 7 percent on the pretext that the rate hikes were justified by a higher frequency of wildfires in the state.

The notion that these rate hikes are justified is completely absurd even when taken solely from an accounting standpoint. Fires in California that have thus far caused the most property damage, such as the

2003 San Diego fire, which burned over 3,000 homes, have a completely negligible effect on the industry in actuarial terms considering the fact there are over 15 million homes in the state with some form of property insurance.

The office of the state insurance commissioner nevertheless approved the rate increase after the second-largest insurance provider, AllState, threatened to no longer seek new customers in California.

Wildfires in California are a frequent occurrence and are once again demonstrating the complete inability of the profit system to muster the more than adequate resources available to prevent the loss of lives, homes and basic infrastructure. The responsibility for whatever damage is caused lies fully on the shoulders of the state government, including Governor Schwarzenegger and the Democratic-controlled legislature. It also lies with the large banks and massive business conglomerates who have already bled the state dry and are more than willing to use widespread human tragedy as a means to increase their profit margins.



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