

Wildfires break out in Southern California

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Severe weather conditions led to a string of massive wildfires late last week, primarily in the Ventura, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, all of which are adjacent to the Los Angeles area. Strong winds, low humidity, high temperatures and a build-up of old vegetation resulted in the scorching of over 30,000 acres of land.

The most devastating of the wildfires was the Springs Fire in Ventura County, west of Los Angeles. Although no injuries or deaths were reported, the fire led to the destruction of several mobile homes and mountain cabins. Fifteen homes and five commercial buildings were also damaged by the fire.

Sections of the heavily trafficked Pacific Coast Highway were closed for more than 24 hours as high winds were sufficient to blow hot embers over the highway and ignite the opposite side. Five thousand residents were evacuated from their homes. The California State University Channel Islands cancelled classes on Thursday and Friday.

The fire also threatened—and nearly burned through—hundreds of acres of crops. The area of Ventura County threatened by the fires is known for production of avocados, citrus fruits and strawberries.

The fire burned at an exceptional rate of speed on Thursday and Friday. As of Thursday night, the fire had burned 8,000 acres and was only 10 percent contained; as of Friday night, thousands more acres burned with the fire only 20 percent contained.

US Forest Service Division Chief Steve Seltzner remarked, “It feels like you’re always behind. Just about the time you get caught up, the fire is out-flanking you.” In another press conference Thursday, Stuart Seto of the National Weather Service simply said, “The Santa Anas [referring to the Santa Ana winds, a significant factor in the Southern California wildfire season] are winning.”

Firefighting efforts were significantly abetted and

disaster averted by a marked change in weather conditions on Saturday. Temperatures dropped nearly 30 degrees as a result of a cold front moving in from the Pacific Ocean and humidity increased from 5 percent on Friday to 70 percent on Saturday.

As of Saturday evening, the fire was 56 percent contained and fire officials expect more than 80 percent containment by Monday.

The fact that such a massive fire occurred in early May, well before the start of the region’s normal wildfire season, does not bode well for the coming months.

Conditions are ripe for more massive wildfires in the coming months with Southern California on track to experience its fourth-driest year on record. Underscoring the impact of global warming on the growth of such fires, the National Weather Service reports that if current trends continue, three of those four driest years will have occurred within the last ten years alone.

Moreover, according to new NASA-led studies, increases of 1 degree Fahrenheit in mean temperature correspond to a 2.6 percent increase in the amount of time drier regions go without rain. Meanwhile, it has been established that during the last 150 years, global mean temperature has increased by 1 degree Celsius, or approximately 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit.

The state of California has recently reported that the Sierra Nevada Mountain snowpack, which provides it with more than a third of its fresh water needs, is at 17 percent of normal for this time of year.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, (CalFire), which is responsible for handling fire protection for a third of the state, has already dealt with 150 more fire incidents this year than in all of 2012 combined.

The city of Los Angeles has only received 5.14 inches of rain this season, while normally receiving 14

inches.

Measurements for rain and water are determined from July 1 of one year to June 30 of the next year. The driest year for Los Angeles was 2006-2007, with only 3.21 inches of rain. The current record for the fourth-driest year is 5.58 inches in 1959, with weather experts predicting that this year is expected to break that record.

Though wildfires are often a natural occurrence, technologies and resources exist to virtually eliminate any threat they pose to homes and lives. Under the profit system, however, those technologies and resources cannot be mobilized.

On the contrary, California's Democratic Governor Jerry Brown has ruthlessly led the charge to cut down fire protection services in spite of the massive risk posed.

The governor's 2011 budget, to cite just one example, cut \$30 million from CalFire, which eliminated seasonal firefighters and reduced engine staffing levels from four firefighters to three. According to a 2010 study by San Diego State University's College of Science's Field Stations program, a four-firefighter crew is able to lay 1,200 feet of hose a full 8.5 minutes faster than a three-engine crew. From a firefighter's standpoint, those critical minutes can make all the difference.

Cuts have also been directed against municipal fire services, including paramedics.

In Los Angeles alone, the LAFD lost four ambulances, nine paramedic units and 18 fire companies. Contra Costa County has already closed four stations from last year, and is currently in the process of closing down two more.

According to standards promulgated by the national Fire Protection Association, the goal of any fire department should be to respond to an emergency in five minutes or less more than 90 percent of the time. Former LAFD Commissioner Tom Curry remarked, "In EMS, [Emergency Medical Service], you are talking about clinical death after five minutes. On structure fires, now you have roof collapse. And in brush fires, the first five minutes is more important than the next five hours."

As of 2012, the Los Angeles Fire Department responds on an average of seven minutes and 24 seconds.



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