

Uncontrolled wildfires burn hundreds of homes in California

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Three uncontrolled wildfires destroyed over 500 homes in Northern California this past week. Well over twenty thousand people have fled their homes across the state, and the state has been placed in a state of emergency.

The wildfires, which have left hundreds of people homeless and have destroyed billions of dollars' worth of property, come amidst California's driest years in recorded history. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimates that California's current drought is its worst in 500 years.

After four consecutive years of drought, the Sierra Nevada snowpack, California's primary water source, is at its lowest level in recorded history. Many reservoirs across the state have fully evaporated. These extremely dry conditions have made California ripe for wildfires.

As of Tuesday, the Valley Fire in Northern California had consumed more than 67,000 acres, 271 square kilometers, and was still burning throughout Lake, Sonoma and Napa counties. The fire was only 15 percent contained.

Four firefighters have suffered second-degree burns and one person, an elderly disabled woman, was killed by the fire. Firefighters report being overwhelmed by the blazes.

Jeff Tunnell, a firefighting specialist with the Bureau of Land Management, told the *LA Times* that the Valley Fire "is the nightmare we feared."

In the towns of Cobb, Middletown, Whispering Pines and Hidden Valley Lake, nearly every home has been destroyed. Between the three fires burning, 585 homes have been destroyed.

Throughout the state, at least 20,000 residents have been forced to evacuate by wildfires. Hundreds have evacuated to emergency shelters after having to leave

their homes with little warning.

Fletcher Thornton, a rancher, told the *Wall Street Journal* that he fled his ranch quickly, leaving at least 100 cattle to die. He told the paper, "We never thought for a second it would be that fast. It was roaring down like a freight train."

Despite forecasts of patchy rain, officials expect that the Valley Fire will continue to burn. "We have an opportunity [with the rain] to make some good, heavy gains," said Robert Michael, Cal Fire commander, "But, this is going to be a long incident."

The Butte Fire in nearby Amador and Calaveras counties has engulfed more than 71,523 acres, 289 square kilometers, and is only 35 percent contained. The fire began on September 9th and quickly grew to 14,500 acres within less than eight hours as temperatures that day reached a high of 105 degrees Fahrenheit.

While no injuries or deaths have been reported, more than 166 residences and 116 outbuildings have been destroyed by the fire.

The largest fire in California this season has been the Rough Fire in the Southern Sierra Nevada mountain range. It has already charred more than 139,000 acres, 563 square kilometers, since it started burning on July 31st. The Rough Fire is the 16th largest wildfire in recorded state history. Due to the fire's remote location only 10 properties so far have been destroyed by the fire.

On Monday, Governor Jerry Brown authorized an additional \$12.5 million to fight the Valley and Butte fires. While the additional money will no doubt help the struggle, it is an inadequate response and a pittance in relation to what could potentially be committed to battling wildfires. California is the richest state in the country and is home to 111 billionaires.

The three ongoing fires may not be the worst of California's fire season. The month of October is typically known for the Santa Ana Winds, fast moving gusts of hot air conducive to the quick growth of wildfires particularly in the southern part of the state.

Nicole Mahrt Ganley, spokeswoman for the Association of California Insurance Companies, emphasized this in a statement to the *Sacramento Bee*: "What's scary is, this is September. The most dangerous season is October." Cal Fire Director Ken Pimlott also warned on Monday that the state's fire season could get much worse, telling reporters, "We don't see an end to the fire season for months to come."

These devastating, and worsening, fires are just one manifestation of the California drought, which has devastated agricultural workers, farmers and ranchers.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, there will be more extreme weather events such as the California drought. Researchers believe it is not mere coincidence that anthropogenic climate change has coincided with record dry years.

Valerie Trouet, an associate professor at the University of Arizona, who determined that the California snowpack was at its lowest in 500 years, stated, "We should be prepared for this type of snow drought to occur much more frequently because of rising temperatures. Anthropogenic warming is making the drought more severe."



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