

Record heat wave fuels wildfire in southern California

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Fueled by a recordbreaking heat wave, a slew of wildfires hit much of the southwestern US late last week, ushering in the 2016 fire season.

In California, a fire originating in the Santa Barbara Mountains has consumed just under 8,000 acres and has over 2,000 firefighters assigned to it, up from just 500 on Thursday. The fire, dubbed the Sherpa fire, is particularly concerning because of its potential for growth and its proximity to the city of Santa Barbara.

The Sherpa fire broke out on June 15th, and has grown rapidly due to local winds called “sundowners”, which are dry, hot winds that come in the evening and can reach speeds of up to 50mph. The fire is not expected to be fully contained for another week.

In the next several days, temperatures in southern California are expected to hit 100F near the coast, and to go up to 120F in some inland areas. This is expected to fuel the sundowners, and thereby stoke the fire as well.

There is a history of powerful fires in the area. In 1990, the Painted Cave fire destroyed about 400 homes in the space of three hours. On Saturday night, fortunately, the sundowners were not as powerful as expected, and firefighters were able to make some headway in containing the inferno.

Last week part of the 101 Highway was shut down as fire spread across it, and drivers stuck there reported seeing fire whirls in the hills. Firefighters have pointed to the highway as an area of special concern.

Four hundred homes and businesses are considered at risk, and a mandatory evacuation order has been put in place in the area. Although some temporary housing has been set up by the Red Cross, many of the residents are without shelter, and expect to live that way for some time. Already questions have arisen about the capacity of the shelters, and several families have

reported resorting to living in their vehicles.

Gayle Robinson, a volunteer with the Red Cross, told the *LA Times* that Santa Barbara Community College where evacuees are staying can hold up to 120 people. She also pointed out that there were about a dozen RVs in the parking lot on Thursday night.

Although this year’s El Niño partially replenished the Sierra Nevada mountain range’s snow pack, which had previously been depleted from California’s historic drought, and led to a cooler spring than in recent years, the snowpack is now all but gone. The state’s snowpack is down to 6 percent of what is normal for this time of year.

In addition to being a significant source of water, the snowpack in the Sierra Nevada plays a role in modulating the state’s weather. Though this year’s melt-off has, in a very immediate sense, alleviated the drought, it is expected that without a snowpack, temperatures in California will increase even further.

Despite agribusiness being given virtual freedom with how it uses its water, including methods which are known to waste water but are slightly more profitable, such as flood irrigation, residents of the state have had restrictions put on their water usage, and are subject to fines if their conservation targets are missed.

State budgeting efforts have focused on cutting as many corners as possible to make the economy more favorable to investors and to businesses. Although 2015 was one of the worst years on record for wildfires, and 6 of the last 11 years have seen fire seasons that broke records in different ways, next year’s budget is set to promise only a paltry increase of \$10 million for firefighting funding.

Elsewhere in the Southwest in New Mexico, Governor Susana Martinez declared a state of emergency over the Dog Head fire, which covers

17,000 acres in that state and is only 9 percent contained. In Arizona, the Cedar fire has burned about 12,000 acres, threatening homes, and 500 firefighters have been mobilized in Utah to combat several smaller fires.



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