

# Sand fire rages in Southern California; 10,000 homes evacuated

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The sand fire raging in the Santa Clarita Mountains just north of the greater Los Angeles area has erupted since Sunday, growing from 22,000 acres to over 37,000. County officials have ordered a state of emergency in the county along with the evacuation of 10,000 homes in the area, and warned that 45,000 more are at risk.

The fire is still only 25 percent contained, up from only 10 percent on Monday night. Fire fighters reported progress on Tuesday, citing favorable weather conditions the previous night. Despite this, difficulty in containing the rear of the fire has continued and the fire has entered the Angeles National Forest, where access is limited.

Firefighters have claimed that thousands of homes have been saved in Santa Clarita due to their quick containment of the area, although 18 homes have been destroyed, and at least person has died.

Smoke plumes were visible in the city of Los Angeles for several days, and air quality warnings were issued as far away as Las Vegas and Reno. Satellite images clearly show a burn scar left behind where the fire burned through all its fuel.

A spokesman for the firefighting effort said of the fire, "This is a big animal." Other officials said that there was "nothing normal" about the speed with which the fire grew.

Of the 20,000 or so evacuated residents, most expect to return to their homes tonight although a mandatory evacuation order remains in place for a number of them. Some residents, panicked and fearful for their homes, tried returning before the evacuation order was lifted. According to witnesses, the one man known to have perished so far died attempting to return to his house.

Some residents have complained about the rushed

warnings issued by authorities. One told KTLA5, "After the third alert, they came in and said we've got 30 minutes to get out a thousand barrels."

Mike Antonovich, the Los Angeles county supervisor, has placed part of the blame on residents for the destruction of the fire, claiming, "By remaining, you create a problem for the fire department to fight the fires, which because of that delay, could also end up having your home burn down, as was the case as some of the other areas where we've already lost 18 homes."

In saying this he is blaming the victims of a fire for something that is fundamentally the fault of the irrationality of capitalism. Natural disasters, including wildfires, can be anticipated and rationally planned for, and in so doing their devastating effects can be significantly mitigated.

As many as 3,000 firefighters have been deployed to contain the fire, including some that had to be called in from neighboring counties. This number is comparable to the size of the entire LA Fire Department (LAFD)—one of the biggest in the country, and one which is still recovering from a five-year hiring freeze that ended in 2014 and is occupied by numerous smaller fires that are cropping up in the most recent heat wave. Firefighters working on the sand fire have reported working 12 hour shifts in what are, needless to say, intense conditions.

In the context of one of the hottest summers on record and repeated warnings by experts about this year's wildfire season (and previous years' for that matter), a shortage of firefighters cannot be explained by simple ignorance. The chronic short-staffing of the fire department and the consequently greater impact of the fire are the responsibility of the politicians and the capitalist interests they defend.

Mitchell Englander of the LA city council said of the

LAFD last month, “At the end of the day, when you’ve got one of the most populated cities in the nation and a chronic shortage of firefighters, [they work] lots of overtime. They’re also the hardest working fire department in the nation, doing more with less. They don’t want this kind of overtime; they’re burnt out. They want more hires.”

Antonovich, after haranguing worried residents for “interfering” with the firefighters’ work, later acknowledged that “now we have a fire season 52 weeks out of the year.”

This fire is only one instance of the many wildfires that have swept the American southwest this summer, and it certainly will not be the last. The degree of devastation may vary for every individual fire, but the failure to fully prepare for them lies at the feet of the economic system which mandates budget cuts and makes impossible a rational allocation of resources to fight them.

Also this week, while the US Small Business Association has offered low-interest federal disaster loans to victims of last month’s Erskine Fire which burned areas north of Los Angeles, FEMA denied assistance to the many victims who are still recovering from their losses.



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