

Blue Cut fire quickly engulfs tens of thousands of acres in Southern California

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An incredibly strong brush fire has engulfed more than 30,000 acres in less than 24 hours near the Southern California city of San Bernardino. The Blue Cut fire, as it is now known, “hit hard, it hit fast—it hit with an intensity that we haven’t seen before,” according to San Bernardino County Fire Chief Mark Hartwig.

The fire started shortly after 10:30 a.m. on Tuesday. By 4 p.m. the same day, the fire had grown to 6,500 acres. At 7:30 p.m. it had grown to 9,000 acres and by 2 a.m. Wednesday 18,000 acres, before growing to its present size of 30,000 acres, covering an area larger than the city of San Francisco. Governor Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency on Tuesday evening as a result of the fire.

According to report in the *San Bernardino Sun*, flames were so strong at the Hess Road area off of Highway 138 that fire crews were in full retreat for at least a half of a mile. At least one fire engine has thus far been destroyed by the flames. Six firefighters were also trapped for hours in the flames on Tuesday but luckily escaped with minor injuries.

As of this writing, more than 80,000 people in the surrounding community have been forced to flee with emergency services deploying cadaver dogs in already burnt out areas. Despite the efforts of nearly 1,300 firefighters with 152 engines and 10 air tankers, significant containment of any kind has yet to occur. Although no official tally has yet to be released of homes and other buildings destroyed, they will most likely number in the many dozens if initial video and photographs are any indication.

The fire has burned in an area known as the Cajon Pass separating the San Gabriel from the San Bernardino mountain range. The 15 Freeway, the main route between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, has been

closed as a result of tall flames leaping from one side of the highway to the other.

The 138 Freeway, providing access to mountain communities and ski areas in the San Gabriel Mountains, has also been closed. Additionally school districts throughout the region have evacuated students and some schools operated by the San Bernardino City Unified School District and the Snowline Unified School District have all been closed.

Conditions in the Cajon Pass area have been extremely ripe to produce a fire of such magnitude. Area high temperatures have exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37 C) since last Saturday and are not expected to drop until Friday of this week. The high temperatures are joined with high winds throughout the pass as well as dry brush that has not burned for 13 years. Humidity levels in the San Bernardino area were at a mere 5 percent or less on Tuesday afternoon.

In its fifth consecutive year of drought, 2016 is also already one of the worst fire years for the state of California. Other major wildfires are also currently burning including the Clayton Fire, which has burned 4,000 acres and destroyed 175 structures north of San Francisco; and the Chimney Fire in San Luis Obispo County, which has burned 7,300 acres and destroyed 40 structures.

As a result of the last four years of extraordinary drought conditions, the US Forest Service reports that more than 66 million dead trees inhabit the California landscape, which will likely provide quick-igniting fuel for future wildfires.

Char Miller, a professor and wildfire researcher at nearby Pomona College, remarked on the extraordinary character of the Blue Cut Fire. “It’s bewildering,” he told the *Sun*. “The fire is moving very, very quickly, and I think that’s one of the examples of the nature of

fire this summer. This is in big measure because we're in a deep drought. The drought, the weather and the temperature have come together in a way that's frankly pretty scary."

The conditions in California also mirror the rest of the country. Largely the result of human-caused climate change, the months of June and July were among the hottest ever recorded.

Professor Miller also spoke to the *Sun* about such factors. "The pattern suggests we're in what people are calling a new normal," he said. "This is not simply tied to drought. It's partly because of climate change. As the [fire] season gets longer, that's again linked to climate change. And that's having a more dramatic effect because more people live in these areas than was true 20 years ago."

Moreover, these conditions have been further exacerbated by the relative pittance paid for firefighting efforts on the part of the state and federal governments. The last budget for fiscal year 2016-2017 passed by Brown and the Democratic-controlled state legislature contained only an additional \$11 million to fight wildfires.

Recent natural disasters such as the Blue Cut fire along with massive flooding in Louisiana, which have impacted the lives of tens of thousands of people, have barely evoked a word of concern from either the Obama administration or the Clinton or Trump campaigns.



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