

Ten dead, thousands displaced as wildfires rip through northern California

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At least 10 people have died and more than 20,000 evacuated, in what authorities are calling one of the most destructive fire emergencies in California's history. According to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, an estimated 1,500 structures have been destroyed and 73,000 acres burned.

Firefighters are battling at least 15 different fires spread across eight counties—Napa, Sonoma, Lake, Mendocino, Yuba, Nevada, Calaveras, and Butte.

The largest of the blazes began around 10 p.m. Sunday night and spread rapidly due to 50 mph winds and dry conditions in Napa and Sonoma counties, a region known for its vineyards and wineries. The fires sent smoke as far south as San Francisco, about 60 miles away.

The fire spread so quickly that some residents received an official evacuation notice three hours after they had already evacuated in the face of the advancing flames.

A large section of Santa Rosa, a city with about 175,000 in Sonoma County, has been ordered to evacuate. Over 200 patients were forced to evacuate from Kaiser Permanente Hospital and Sutter Hospital, including expectant mothers. At Kaiser Permanente, nurses had to race patients away from the area in their own personal vehicles.

Over 100 patients have been treated at local Napa and Sonoma county hospitals for fire-related illnesses—including burns, smoke inhalation and shortness of breath.

The immediate cause of the fire is unknown but authorities noted that dry conditions made it easy for the fires to spread. Janet Upton, a deputy director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, told the *New York Times* that October is typically the

busiest month for wildfires in California. Low humidity, dry conditions, a buildup of vegetation, and heavy winds known as diablo winds create prime conditions for wildfires to spread rapidly. “Combined, that’s a recipe for disaster,” she noted.

“I’ve been with the department for 31 years, and some years are notorious,” Upton said, concluding, “I’m afraid that 2017 is going to be added to that list now.”

Governor Jerry Brown issued an emergency proclamation for Napa, Sonoma and Yuba counties. “These fires have destroyed structures and continue to threaten thousands of homes, necessitating the evacuation of thousands of residents,” his emergency proclamation stated.

“This is really serious. It’s moving fast. The heat, the lack of humidity and the winds are all driving a very dangerous situation and making it worse,” Brown said at a news conference. “It’s not under control by any means. But we’re on it in the best way we know how.”

Napa County Fire Chief Barry Biermann pointed to a lack of resources that exacerbates the danger posed by wildfires and limits the ability to contain fires when they break out. “As of right now, with these conditions, we can’t get in front of this fire and do anything about the forward progress,” he said. Firefighters have been forced to focus on evacuation efforts.

Because fires are blazing in more than one part of California, firefighters are not able to focus their efforts on properly combating the flames.

Additionally, state and federal budgets have not kept up with the increasing scope and intensity of wildfires. At the beginning of this month, before the latest fires, Cal Fire had used \$250 million of its \$426.9 million emergency fund which was expected to last until June of next year.

On federal lands, which account for one-third of the state, there is no emergency fund for fighting wildfires, meaning that money is taken from fire prevention and forest health budgets, only exacerbating the dangers.

“So real work on the ground to reduce the intensity of fires isn’t getting done or is being delayed,” the director of Cal Fire, Ken Pimlott, told KQED news earlier this month. “It really just further exacerbates the intensity of fires because we can’t get on the federal ground in particular to get the fuels treated.”

Recent budget cuts have also hampered efforts to prevent and battle wildfires. California’s proposed 2017-18 budget cut funds for local efforts to remove dead trees to just \$2 million. Acres of dead trees are a central problem fueling wildfires.

Cal Fire saw funding slashed nearly in half from \$91 million to \$41.7 million for the extended fire season, increased firefighter surge capacity, Conservation Corps fire suppression crews, and aerial assets.

Active wildfires were reported across the state this weekend. A fire burning through Orange County in Southern California burned multiple structures and forced residents of about 1,000 homes to evacuate. The wildfire spread over more than 4,000 acres and has burned at least six buildings in Anaheim.



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