

Northern California wildfires leave at least 15 dead, 200 missing

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A series of firestorms continued to burn out of control Tuesday across the wine-producing region of Northern California—Napa, Sonoma and Yuba Counties.

The casualty count as of this writing was 15 dead, with some 200 missing-person calls to the police. More than 2000 structures have been destroyed and more than 115,000 acres have been incinerated. Some twenty thousand people remain evacuated. Cell phone service is out in many areas of Napa and Sonoma after 77 cell sites were damaged or put out of commission.

Fire invaded Santa Rosa, a city with a population of some 175,000 in Sonoma County, approximately 55 miles north of San Francisco. The blaze completely destroyed the Coffey Park subdivision and threatened the Oakmont neighborhood.

Most of the fatalities reported so far have been from Sonoma County—including two new deaths added Tuesday morning—after flames from the wind-fueled fire scorched housing developments and burned businesses to the ground in downtown Santa Rosa.

A Hilton hotel and several large stores were also burned. The Sutter Santa Rosa Regional Hospital and Kaiser's Santa Rosa Medical Center had to be evacuated. Flames consumed a Catholic high school building, as well as many wineries in the area.

Those residents who were allowed to return to their homes after dramatic evacuations Sunday night were shocked by what they found. The *San Jose Mercury News* talked to Justo Perez, who returned to find that his home, car and belongings had been destroyed. "I have these rubber boots, these pants, and that dirty shirt," said Perez.

Brenda Burke, 55, described the flight from her cottage north of Napa as "awful." The fire "would move with the wind. You knew when a house went up because there would be a whole slew of smoke and you

could hear the propane tanks exploding."

Burke went back Monday morning, past fire-gutted houses and smoking lawns. When she got to her drive, she saw flames "from what appeared to be the front of my house."

Later that day, outside a Napa emergency shelter with a dog and a cat pulled from a parked van, Burke explained, "I have what I'm wearing right now and my dog and my phone. And I have friends and family. I will be fine."

Two senior citizens perished in the city of Napa before they had a chance to flee the rapidly spreading flames. "[Sara] was wheelchair-bound and [Charles] was 100 years old," Napa County Sheriff's Sgt. Mark Foster reported. "I know they had a caretaker. She was barely able to get out in time and wasn't able to get to them."

About 4,000 firefighters are involved in fighting the wine country fires, including firefighters from the state of Nevada and US Forest Service workers. Air tankers have dropped hundreds of thousands of gallons of fire retardant.

However, the major fires in Napa and Sonoma Counties remained zero percent contained on Tuesday, with high winds that feed the fires expected to pick up again this week. Depending on the winds, it may take weeks to fully contain the fires.

Chief Ken Pimlott, head of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) indicated that the estimate of burned structures—the fifth highest ever from a group of California wildfires—was tentative and bound to go up.

Pimlott also reported that firefighters were still prioritizing saving lives over battling the blazes. TV stations streamed images of devastated neighborhoods where every home had seemingly melted away.

Meanwhile in Southern California's Orange County, a wind-driven wildfire ravaged the Anaheim Hills. The fire, still not contained, by Tuesday morning had burnt 7,500 acres in several cities and ignited 24 homes. The fire, dubbed Canyon Fire 2, after a nearby fire in September, prompted the evacuation of more than one thousand people in the cities of Orange, Orange Park Acres, and Tustin, as well as freeway closures.

Smoke from the blaze was scattered north into Los Angeles County, prompting emergency instructions for people with respiratory problems to stay indoors with their windows closed and, if possible, with their air conditioners on.

The current northern California fires rank among the most destructive in the state's history. A combination of high westerly winds, bringing in very dry air from the mountains, and dry brush contributed to their ferocity.

The intense fire season has not been confined to California. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, the agency that mobilizes firefighting resources between regions within the US, wildfires have consumed 8.5 million acres so far this year, 40 percent more than the yearly national average for the previous decade. Much of this is attributed to global warming, which has lengthened the fall fire season in the Western States and Canada's British Columbia.

All of those regions are experiencing more and longer wildfires this year. The wildfire danger is also increasing in areas, such as the southeast, where wildfires were once a rare occurrence.

On top of the lengthening fire season, the practice of the US Forest Service of shifting funds from the fire prevention budget, whenever needed to fight existing fires, means that the necessary tasks, such as clearing dry brush and building fire roads, makes it more likely for relatively small fires to spread out of control.

The total budget for clearing brush and preventing forest fires at the national and state levels has proven to be totally inadequate for meeting the ever-growing need.

Yet the Trump administration is proposing to further gut the firefighting budget for 2018; these include slashing \$300 million from the US Forest Service's firefighting budget and \$50 million from its fire prevention program. In addition, it is proposed that the federal budget for volunteer fire departments, often the

first responders in wildfire emergencies, will face a 23 percent budget cut.

In California, this July, the state legislature, which is controlled by the Democratic Party, suspended a fire prevention fee. Democratic Governor Jerry Brown signed the measure and assured Californians that the state would continue to provide the same level of fire prevention services and programs that "have proven to be very valuable in protecting habitable structures and communities from wildfires."



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