

Fires rage across Southern California for fifth day

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The Southern California wildfires raged for a fifth straight day Friday, with firefighters working round the clock in an attempt to keep them contained.

There are six major fires. The Liberty Fire in Murietta, north of San Diego, has burned through 300 acres and is now 60 percent contained. The Lilac Fire, also north of San Diego, burned through 4,100 acres and was at zero percent containment on Friday. Fires also continued in the Sylmar and Lake View Terrace suburbs of Los Angeles, along with blazes in Bel Air in West Los Angeles and in Santa Clarita.

Crews made significant advances on fires in the San Bernardino area east of Los Angeles, and those are now believed to be completely contained.

The largest of the remaining fires, the Thomas Fire in the coastal city of Ventura, grew to 132,000 acres and is at only 10 percent contained as of this writing.

The fires have collectively burned through 158,000 acres and driven more than 200,000 people from their homes. While firefighters are making progress, the fires continue to spread.

The Thomas Fire has destroyed 400 structures and threatens 15,000 more. Wildlife officials say the Thomas Fire threatens the critically endangered California Condor population, including the handful of birds living in the Los Padres National Forest's Sespe Condor Sanctuary.

The first fatality attributable to the Thomas Fire was confirmed on Friday. Virginia Pesola, 70, of Santa Paula, a suburb of Ventura, was found dead in her car after crashing along an evacuation route near the fire. According to emergency officials, Pesola's cause of death was blunt force trauma, along with terminal smoke inhalation and thermal injuries.

The Lilac Fire near San Diego is the most recent of the large fires and continues to grow. Some 85 structures have been lost and 5,000 more are threatened. Three people have been hospitalized with burns and 25 horses

have been killed at a thoroughbred training center.

"The threat is still high," said John Choi of the North County Fire Protection District. "Unfortunately, we have a small window due to the fact that this fire is going to do what it's going to do today and afterwards. If we can't catch it in this short period of time, we have bigger winds expected on Sunday."

According to Southern California Edison, more than 11,000 of its customers in the region were without power on Friday. In Ventura, the Santa Paula Hospital and Ventura County Medical Center had to rely on backup generators due to fire-caused blackouts this week.

Although there have been minimal injuries and little loss of life as a result of the fires, smoke inhalation and respiratory issues have caused an increase in emergency room visits throughout the week. Los Angeles health officials have warned residents to limit all outdoor activity, close windows and use air conditioning to recirculate inside air. They have also advised residents to wear N95 masks to protect from harmful particles when going outside.

The fires also introduce severe risks to the region's water supplies. To cite only one example, a fire-related power outage shut down pumps moving water to reservoirs in Ventura County. According to reports, at least one of the reservoirs went dry, which, in turn, caused severe drops in water pressure. This raises the possibility of negative pressure in the region's antiquated water system, causing polluted water to flow back into the system.

"Any time you depressurize the water system, there are contamination concerns," said Jeff Densmore, a senior engineer for the Division of Drinking Water of the state's Water Resources Control Board. Tens of thousands of Ventura residents are in a boil water advisory. Tests are currently being conducted by the water resources board to detect any presence of E. Coli or other contaminants in

the water.

At the nearby Casitas Municipal Water District water treatment facility, staff were forced to evacuate due to fire danger and had to turn off water chlorination treatment for the duration of their absence. If chlorination had been kept on, intense heat or flames could have caused a chlorine gas leak, leading to a severe civil emergency.

The water crisis is also exacerbated by the needs of fire fighters, who require extremely high hydrant pressure to effectively combat flames.

By September of this year, US wildfires had already consumed 8.5 million acres, 40 more than the yearly average for the previous decade. This is due primarily to human causes, including global warming and systematic under-funding of fire prevention efforts, including brush clearing. The fire services themselves are being starved of funds, leaving them with too few engines, too few planes and helicopters, and insufficient personnel to fight fires of this magnitude.

“This is looking like the type of year that might occur more often in the future,” said A. Park Williams, a climate scientist at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, New York.

Alex Hall, a climate scientist at the University of California Los Angeles, remarked, “For fires, sequencing is really important. The sequence we’ve seen over the past five or six years is certainly very similar to the changes that we project as climate change continues to unfold.”

Years of drought in California have led to dry and dying vegetation. This, coupled with high winds and record low humidity, produce perfect conditions for the growth of wildfires. The rainfall experienced in the state last winter, far from ending the state’s six-year drought, served to provide acres of new kindling for fires to consume.

On Friday, after a four-day delay, the Trump administration issued an emergency declaration for the California wildfires. The action requires the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to aid in-state and local fire response.

The White House’s statement reads: “This action will help alleviate the hardship and suffering that the emergency may inflict on the local population, and provide appropriate assistance for required emergency services... to save lives and to protect property and public health and safety, and to lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe in the counties of Los Angeles, Riverside, San Diego, Santa Barbara and Ventura.”

The Trump administration, however, is planning to severely cut the federal firefighting budget for 2018 to help pay for its tax give-away to the ultra-rich. It is proposed that \$300 million be cut from the US Forest Service’s firefighting budget, and \$50 million from its fire prevention programs. The federal budget for volunteer fire departments will also experience a 23 percent budget cut.

The tax plans currently passing through Congress include particularly cruel provisions directed against wildfire victims. Under the proposed plans being reconciled between the House and the Senate, owners of uninsured or underinsured properties will no longer be able to deduct losses from fire destruction in their tax filings.

To make up for this loss, Republican Representative Mimi Walters of Laguna Beach is sponsoring a bill allowing homeowners to make penalty-free withdrawals from their retirement accounts in lieu of tax benefits.

In the midst of the fire disaster that is economically devastating thousands of California families, Democratic Governor Jerry Brown has placed CalFire employees in the crosshairs of his pension “reform.” He previously signed the Public Employees’ Pension Reform Act, restricting benefits for all state workers hired after January 1, 2013. The governor has now filed a brief with the California Supreme Court calling for the gutting of pension guarantees for all existing public workers.

The brief, dripping with cynicism, says in regard to Brown’s initial support for the Pension Reform Act: “At stake was the public’s trust in the government’s prudent use of taxpayer funds.”

There can be no doubt that in the aftermath of the current fires, the administration and its backers in the Democratic and Republican parties will try to offset losses by imposing cuts on CalFire and other firefighters, 4,000 of whom are now working 12- to 16-hour shifts each day to save homes and lives.



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