

After ten days, largest of Southern California wildfires continues to rage

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Ten days after it began, the Thomas Fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties continues to burn. It is now the largest fire of the 2017 California wildfire season, having burned through 238,500 acres as of Thursday morning and is now the fifth largest wildfire in state history. Thus far, it has destroyed more than 900 homes and is responsible for at least one death.

At the height of its progress last week, the Thomas Fire had advanced at a rate of nearly an acre per second. In fact, the Thomas Fire was burning so quickly at the time that it fit the definition of a firestorm, meaning a fire strong enough to generate its own storm-force winds. Such phenomena are also produced by large-scale explosives, most notably in the aerial fire bombings of Dresden and Hamburg in the Second World War as well as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

While firefighters, aided by more favorable weather conditions, had made significant progress early in week to halt the fire's progress, it still remains only 30 percent contained and personnel are now racing to protect communities in the fire's path before a shift in powerful winds forecast for the coming weekend. The fire also threatens acres of nearby avocado groves, which would have a devastating effect on the industry if burned.

Mark Brown, operations section chief for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, warned nearby Santa Barbara residents to prepare for the worst. "When the wind starts pushing it, we can throw everything we have at it and it's not going to do any good," he said.

Nearly 250,000 residents in Santa Barbara and Montecito are at risk from the fire's advance, along with 62,000 structures worth \$46 billion. Firefighters are now working around the clock to build containment

lines, clear brush, dig firebreaks and build small backfires to burn fuel. Trucks are spraying retardant on hillsides and some small buildings are being wrapped in protective metallic sheeting. Thirty-three helicopters and eight airplanes have also been regularly dropping water and fire retardant on the encroaching fires.

While officials believe a few months might pass before the cause of the Thomas Fire is determined, Cal Fire is currently investigating whether utility equipment owned by the Southern California Edison power company initially caused the blaze. A December 11 news release by Southern California Edison suggests that the utility's role in other fires that burned through Southern California last week may be under investigation as well.

According to an article in Thursday's *Los Angeles Times*, witnesses reported seeing a line snapping on a high voltage transmission tower in Little Tujunga Canyon with an accompanying shower of bright sparks. The snapped power line coincided with the start of the Creek Fire northeast of Los Angeles last week. That fire burned more than 60 homes and was responsible for the closure of more than 200 schools and the evacuations of more than 80,000 area residents. It burned through more than 15,600 acres.

According to the *Times* Report, Gail Thackray, a Little Tujunga resident, saw the downed transmission line literally "smacking the hill." She said, "There was fire concentrated over there and sparks coming off the pylon. It spread each direction." If the witness' report is correct, then it appears that a high degree of probability exists that the downed line caused the fire. Southern California Edison owns that transmission line.

Cal Fire is still investigating the role of Pacific Gas & Electric in fires that caused more than a billion dollars in damages and led to the deaths of more than 40

people last October in Northern California.

While these investigations are taking weeks and even months, only a few days transpired before officials claimed it had definitively determined that a wild fire in the upscale Los Angeles suburb of Bel Air started at a nearby homeless encampment. It is believed that a cooking fire was responsible for the blaze, known as the Skirball Fire, which destroyed six homes.

Investigators found the encampment largely destroyed by the fire, with little remaining except for pots, pans and various other metal items. The camp existed in a ravine close to the 405 Freeway and cannot be seen from the freeway or any other nearby streets. No residents of the camp have been found to question since the fire began.

To address similar future risk, a newly assembled fire prevention task force in Los Angeles is considering mandatory evacuations of hillside and brush area encampments during days of elevated fire risk. This is similar to programs currently carried out to clear streetside encampments such as those near the city's infamous Skid Row under the pretext of communicable disease prevention. Possessions taken during such raids are often shipped off to storage units at great distances—and therefore are no longer accessible to the homeless.

Regardless of the intentions of the task force, such a mechanism will inevitably be used to begin clearing the homeless out of wealthier areas. To that end, Nickie Miner, vice president of the Bel Air-Beverly Crest Neighborhood Council, was quoted by the *Los Angeles Times* as advocating for a massive regulatory overhaul to completely eliminate any and all hillside encampments.

Whatever form the new regulations take, they will inevitably be used to restrict the activities of the homeless in hopes that they will abandon certain parts of the city altogether. Similar regulations are being enacted in cities across the country including in Portland, Oregon, where the implementation of “pedestrian use zones,” after prompting by an op-ed column penned by billionaire Columbia Sportswear CEO Tim Boyle, leaves sidewalks off limits to homeless people for sitting or sleeping.

Underscoring the naked class character of the campaign against the homeless people allegedly involved in sparking the Skirball fire were photos

recently posted on the *Los Angeles Times* website showing firefighters carrying heavy artworks out of Bel Air mansions in the midst of evacuations.

One of Bel-Air's wealthiest residents is 21st Century Fox and News Corp CEO Rupert Murdoch with a current net worth of \$13.8 billion. According to Bloomberg News, Murdoch stands to gain another \$2 billion as a result of the purchase of 21st Century Fox by Walt Disney Co.

An annual count last May found that the homeless population in Los Angeles County had increase by 23 percent to nearly 58,000 people in the last year alone. The count of homeless in the wealthy areas of Bel-Air and Brentwood rose from 4,659 to 5,511 during the same period.

Last week a special rapporteur to the UN Human Rights Council visited a section of the city's Skid Row neighborhood. Phillip Alston, the rapporteur, had also recently visited Lowndes County, Alabama where he found raw sewage disposal into open pits as well as the presence of hookworm, a parasite typically associated with extreme poverty in South America, Sub Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia.

In Skid Row, Alston found dozens of homeless encamped outside of a local shelter, which was at capacity. He also witnessed untended homeless in wheelchairs with colostomy bags. “I think it's on a scale I hadn't anticipated, block after block of people,” he said. “When you see how concentrated it is, it's more shocking.”

Alston's preliminary report is expected to be released on Friday, with a full report due next spring. He will also visit Washington state as well as stop in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, where a significant homeless population also resides.

The US is alone among big industrial nations in consistently rejecting access to housing and sanitation as a basic human right. No sanctions or penalties of any kind will be issued as a result of Alston's findings, which can only be described as demonstrating a crime against humanity.



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