

Southern California wildfires continue into third week

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Firefighters in Southern California continue to battle the Thomas Fire northwest of Los Angeles more than sixteen days after it began. While the fire is currently 60 percent contained, officials believe it almost inevitable that the fire will continue to burn into January.

According to the National Weather Service, wind gusts are expected to reach up to 50 miles per hour Thursday, increasing the likelihood of expansion. In some mountaintop canyons, gusts could reach 60 miles per hour. The Thomas Fire is now the second largest of its kind in state history and is poised to threaten the city of Santa Barbara as well as the nearby community of Montecito. Thus far, the fire has killed two people and destroyed more than 765 homes.

Firefighters are working regularly to hose vegetation, set controlled burns to reduce fuel for the oncoming fire, and are felling trees and other vegetation. Vegetation in the area remains critically dry, posing an extreme risk for fire acceleration. “Firefighters have been working hard for three-and-a-half days to prep for tomorrow,” Captain Steve Concialdi of the Orange County Fire Authority told the media.

Large portions of the affected area have not seen any rainfall since last February while relative humidity has remained in single digits throughout the lifespan of the fire.

Parts of the 101 Freeway were closed off on Sunday and Monday due to the fires near Santa Barbara. In an interview with the Associated Press, Pierre Henry, a bakery owner in Montecito, described the conditions in the area prior to his evacuation. “The worst was the smoke,” he said, “You couldn’t breathe at all, and it became worse when the wind started. All the ashes and the dust on the street were in the air. It was very, very frightening.”

Though the cause of the fire is still under investigation, a group of Ventura residents has filed a lawsuit against the Southern California Edison Utility Company. The suit alleges that Southern California Edison crews working on a nearby campground sparked the fire. According to filed court papers, the company’s “construction activities caused the ignition of dry vegetation at this construction site, which set off this massive wildfire [the Thomas Fire].”

The suit also alleges that area fire hydrants did not work properly because of power outages and that downed power lines may have also been to blame for starting the fire. In fact, a resident of the Little Tujunga Canyon area north of Los Angeles attested to the fact that she saw a downed power line, also owned by Southern California Edison, sparking the Creek Fire last week, which burned for a week and a half but now is contained.

Alexander Robertson, an attorney representing the Ventura plaintiffs, attested to the anger of his clients over what is likely the criminal role of Southern California Edison in causing and accelerating the fire. “Many of our clients are very angry and confused as to why in the height of a firestorm the fire hydrants lost power ... it was just like somebody shut the valve off,” he said. “The firefighters had to send their engines where there was pressure, and it was a 20-minute round trip.”

Regardless of the lawsuit’s findings, it will have little impact on the behemoth utility company. While the company rakes in hundreds of millions of dollars every year, it paid only \$37 million in fines after it was found guilty of sparking the 2007 Malibu Canyon Fire, which destroyed dozens of homes and left hundreds without power.

Southern California Edison’s northern counterpart,

Pacific Gas and Electric, still has a case pending against it for its role in sparking the 70,000-acre Butte Fire in 2015. The fire killed two people, and Pacific Gas and Electric was found by Cal Fire investigators to be responsible for starting the fire.

The firefighters fighting the Thomas Fire are nonetheless fortunate to be aided in their efforts by advanced technologies not available to them as little as a year ago.

The National Weather Service employs 80 “incident meteorologists” who spent a record 31,000 hours this year working on wildfires. Utilizing a network of drones, mobile weather stations and other technologies, these meteorologists specialize in monitoring of localized weather conditions that is essential for the daily tactical orientation of the firefighting groups. This is especially critical, as older permanent stations throughout Ventura County have been incinerated by the Thomas Fire.

“As an end user of all the products that these people make, we base almost all of our decisions, as far as strategically and operationally, on the weather,” Jana Luis, division chief of predictive services at the CalFire Sacramento headquarters told Noozhawk. “So having current and accurate weather is huge to us.”

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) also deployed its high altitude ER-2 aircraft to observe the fire. Flying at an altitude of 65,000 feet, it is capable of making extraordinarily detailed analysis of water content in vegetation and thereby can provide firefighting crews with such information to better inform resource deployment.

There is a glaring contradiction between the existence of such powerful technological achievements, however, and a wildfire that has reached a size not seen since the 1930s, when firefighting technologies were far less advanced, to say the least.

According to fire officials, yearly fire seasons are now 40 to 50 days longer than they were just 20 years ago. Moreover, the state itself has suffered from 6 consecutive years of drought leading to mass tree death.

As of 2016, 102 million trees had died as a result of the drought. This has provided prime conditions for fires as the state relies almost entirely on the limited efforts of private industry, which needs to keep supply at a minimum to maintain profits, to clear the dead

pinus to resell as lumber or firewood.

In spite of this mass devastation, California’s Democratic governor Jerry Brown declared the state’s drought officially over in April of 2017 due to a marked but temporary increase in rainfall during the previous winter. As a result, the governor decreased budgetary amounts proposed to address the five-year drought from \$179 million to \$63 million. Of the \$63 million, only \$2 million was budgeted to help local agencies clear brush and other fire fuels.

In addition, the ruling elite, Democratic and Republican alike, is enacting measures to ensure that wildfire victims are not made whole after their respective life-altering tragedies.

The recent tax plan passed by Congress, for example, includes the elimination of tax write-offs for property destruction as a result of wildfires. The bill eliminates the deduction entirely beginning with losses incurred in 2018.

Under current tax law, casualty losses that exceed ten percent of adjusted gross income and are not covered by insurance can be deducted by homeowners. In 2015 alone, California homeowners claimed casualty loss deductions in excess of \$700 million.

Waivers to the current casualty loss provision have been passed before, although these have been in the form of a marginal increase over the ten percent adjusted gross income threshold.

Additionally, bills now before the US Congress would allow for wildfire and other disaster victims to deduct from their retirement plans, allowing them to pay for losses themselves in the absence of government assistance.



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