

At least 13 dead as rainfall in Southern California triggers mudslides and flooding

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At least 13 people were confirmed dead Tuesday as a result of the first significant rainfall to reach Southern California this season. The rains were the heaviest seen in the region since last February. The multiple deaths were primarily caused by mudslides triggered as the rains fell in areas affected by massive wildfires that engulfed the region only a few weeks before.

One of these fires, the Thomas Fire in Ventura County, grew to be the largest in state history and has been burning since December 4, 2017, although fire officials are allowing the fire to burn at its remaining northeastern flank with complete containment expected by January 21, 2018.

The most severe impact from mudslides and flooding Tuesday occurred, as expected, in the area ravaged by the Thomas Fire. Rains began in the area around 2:30 a.m., causing mudflows in excess of three feet deep. More than five inches of rain poured over thousands of acres of hillsides barren of any vegetation after the fires burned through it all.

Approximately 7,000 residents were evacuated from affected hillside communities according to Santa Barbara County officials. Officials also issued a boil water notice for the entire Montecito Water District on Tuesday afternoon.

While only two individuals were killed directly by the Thomas Fire itself, it can be said that Tuesday's mudslides increased the total to ten, as the danger of mudslide activity would have been sharply reduced if not completely eliminated in the absence of the fire's recent devastation. Moreover, officials estimate that the death toll will increase as rescue efforts continue. "We'll definitely have more [deaths]," said Mike Eliason, spokesman for the Santa Barbara County Fire Department, speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*.

In addition to the eight dead Tuesday, more than 27

were injured, with one mudslide lifting a home in the Montecito area off its foundations and sweeping a young boy more than half a mile before rescuers found him trapped under a US Highway 101 overpass.

The US Coast Guard sent rescue helicopters into the area Tuesday morning to search for residents stranded on rooftops after mudslides prevented their escapes.

Mudslides and storm runoff led to a 30-mile section of Highway 101 being shut down in both directions. Sections of Routes 33 and 150 were also shut down on Tuesday. Caltrans District 5 reported on its Twitter page that Highway 101 will remain closed until Thursday night to clear massive amounts of mud and debris.

The highway closure, however, is hindering efforts of rescuers which may lead to further deaths and injuries.

Santa Barbara and Montecito along with other surrounding communities are sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean to the south and the Santa Ynez Mountains to the north. The 101 Freeway therefore acts as a transportation bottleneck for the area especially given the fact that other smaller mountain roads are either officially or effectively closed by the mudslides.

Los Angeles County had also been ravaged by wildfires last December and mudslides accompanied the heavy rainfall there as well.

Footage showed vehicles and homes lifted and dragged by storm surges. The force unleashed by a torrent of mud and debris was so great that three fire hydrants in the Burbank area north of Los Angeles were sheared, releasing approximately 130,000 gallons of water into the debris flow. Water pressure was eventually shut off to the affected hydrants; however, nearby residents will likely be without water for another two days or more.

The surge of rain throughout Los Angeles closed

sections of the 110 Freeway, and the customs area at the international terminal of Los Angeles International Airport was also flooded, with passengers diverted to adjoining terminals.

Mudslides are also a significant danger in Northern California, where fires burned through more than 245,000 acres last October. The California rainy season typically peaks in January or February, although significant rainfall can last through March and even into April.



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