

# Deadly mudslides in Southern California expose inadequate infrastructure

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Four days after 3-foot-high mudslides raged through the California coastal community of Montecito, rescuers continue to search for survivors. As the odds of finding anyone still alive decrease sharply, the amount of emergency workers on the ground doubled to 1,250 since Thursday. “We are searching for a miracle right now,” Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown told reporters.

Rescuers are making use of helicopters equipped with night vision and thermal imaging as well as All Terrain Vehicles as many roads still remain impassible. Crews on the ground are equipped with long poles to test out the ground in front of them as the heavy mud and debris can hide open manholes, pools and other hazards.

So far, the official death toll from the mudslides stands at 18 with 27 severely injured. The names of the deceased were released by Santa Barbara officials on Friday. The oldest victim was 89 years old while the youngest was just three.

Victims included 54-year-old Mark Montgomery, a surgeon with Associated Hand Surgeons in nearby Santa Barbara. Montgomery died at home along with his 22-year-old daughter Caroline who was a student Barnard College in New York City. They are survived by the elder Montgomery’s wife and two sons.

Rebecca Riskin, 61, also perished. In her youth, she was a ballerina with the American Ballet Theater in New York before an injury ended her career. She later moved back to the west coast and finally to Montecito where she became a real estate broker specializing in high end properties.

Also among the dead is 49-year-old David Cantin, a vice president of sales for NDS Surgical Imaging, a company that sells operating room technology and equipment. Cantin was a Boy Scout master in his spare time. His daughter Lauren, 14, survived and was pulled from the wreckage of the family home on Wednesday while Cantin’s teenage son Jack is still reported missing.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported Thursday that Santa

Barbara officials did not send an emergency alert to cellphones warning of mudslides until after the flooding had already begun. The alert was sent about 3:50 a.m. Tuesday morning while the floods began at approximately 2:30 a.m. Last October, residents in Santa Rosa in Northern California were also not notified via emergency cellphone alert about encroaching fires, likely leading to the deaths of more than 40 people in the area.

The events in Montecito also reveal the antiquated and inadequate state of California’s infrastructure. Manmade basins and channels, many of which were created more than a century ago, cannot cope with the extreme weather events caused by manmade climate change such as those facing Southern California over the past few months.

After the Thomas Fire, the largest in state history, burned through the Santa Barbara area last month, fire crews anticipated that conditions would be ripe for massive mud and debris slides once rains came later in the season.

At the time, 11 basins were emptied of existing debris, however the force of Tuesday morning’s deluge overwhelmed the basins nonetheless. The largest of the basins, according to Tom Fayram, deputy public works director for Santa Barbara county, had a capacity of more than 20,000 dump trucks.

The basins were created in the aftermath of 1964’s Coyote Fire as well as the Romero Fire of 1971. They were not able to keep up, however, due to not only the size of the Thomas Fire but also the short interval between the fire’s exit and first seasonal rainfall last Tuesday.

While wildfires destroy vegetation, and make ground less capable of absorbing rainwater, they also release rocks and sediment into lower canyons and valleys. A heavy rainfall or flashflood event therefore creates the perfect conditions for Montecito-like events.

In addition to elevating temperatures leading to more

intense wildfire events, tectonic plate movement has led to slow mountain range elevation in the Santa Barbara area. This is according to Josh West, associate professor of earth sciences at the University of Southern California.

Moreover, any rainfall that exceeds an accumulation rate of a half inch per hour under conditions prevalent in the region is likely to trigger large debris flows. Officials estimate that there is still enough loose sediment and debris near the Montecito area to trigger more mudslides this season.

These conditions could easily be replicated across many regions of the state burned by fires this year and in years past. According to Michael Lamb, a professor of geology at the California Institute of Technology, a hillside's soil may take up to two decades to be restored to pre-fire conditions. Vegetation takes approximately five years to regrow after a fire.

Of the twenty largest fires in state history, or at least since 1932 when the accurate records started to be kept, fifteen occurred within the last two decades. The Thomas Fire, the largest in state history, was just declared 100 percent contained today after burning since December 4, 2017.

In addition to the loss of life in Montecito, more than 100 homes were completely destroyed and more than 300 were severely damaged. Several commercial properties were also lost.

A boil water advisory is in effect for the entire community as the slides broke water mains leaving all residents without water for the foreseeable future. Residents are also completely without gas and electricity. "A majority of Montecito and that whole area is in the Stone Age right now," said Mike Eliason with the Santa Barbara County Fire Department.

A 15 mile stretch of the 101 Freeway, the principal artery through the Santa Barbara region, remains completely closed to both southbound and northbound traffic. The CalTrans state transportation agency had hoped for a Monday reopening of the freeway, however, according to a press release from the agency Friday, the reopening date, "is being rescinded and the estimated opening is unknown."

Trains have been able to reach the affected areas while area hospital workers including nurses and doctors with Cottage Health in Santa Barbara are relying on ferry services into Santa Barbara harbor for their commute each day.

The governor's office announced that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) granted

California's request to expand the disaster declaration already in place for areas affected by the Thomas Fire, including Montecito.

FEMA, an arm of the Department of Homeland Security, is authorized to reimburse up to 75 percent of local emergency costs. This will do nothing to prevent future catastrophic wildfires and their attendant debris flows.

Fire-fighting agencies throughout the state have already spent well over their limited budgets fighting fires and are left tapping funds meant for fire prevention efforts. The US Forest Service, for example, spent over half of its budget last year on firefighting compared with only 16 percent in 1995.

Sensing the inevitable outrage caused by FEMA's inadequate assistance, Democratic Representative Salud Carbajal wrote an appeal to the White House for individual assistance to those affected by the Thomas Fire and subsequent mudslides. The White House denied an initial version of the request. President Trump, who this week referred to the earthquake-ravaged nation of Haiti as a "shithole country," has thus far not said a word about the tragedy in Montecito.

Despite the posturing of Democrats in Sacramento as irreconcilable opponents of Trump, they revealed their true colors this week with the release of Governor Jerry Brown's proposed budget for the 2018-2019 fiscal year, his last as governor.

The budget includes a diversion of more than \$5 billion into the state's rainy-day fund, a means of making cuts to social programs permanent. Answering a reporter's question about public universities getting a 3 percent funding increase after years of the opposite, the governor angrily responded, "It is enough. You're getting 3 percent more and that's it. They're not going to get any more."

Most notably, the governor's budget includes no new increases in fire protection and firefighting. The governor, who postures as a defender of the environment and has openly challenged the Trump administration's denial of climate change, is first and foremost a defender of the profit system. His budget insures that the catastrophic effects of wildfires and natural disasters will continue well after his term is complete.



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