

Rainstorm ends California wildfires, but threatens to cause flash flooding

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A statewide rainstorm which began Tuesday night has brought an end to the wildfire season in California and almost fully extinguished the Camp Fire, the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in state history.

The rainstorm comes as a mixed blessing, as it both ends the wildfires and air pollution plaguing the state, while preparing the conditions for debris flows that could compound the dire situation facing homeless evacuees. Further, the rain will make it far more difficult to find the remains of those that died in the Camp Fire and will likely cause significant environmental damage throughout the region.

The most recent press release Thursday morning listed the Camp Fire at 153,336 acres and 90 percent contained. It noted: "Precipitation has minimized fire activity and all fire lines continue to hold." As of this writing, there have been 83 confirmed deaths, while 563 people are still listed as missing, a number that is constantly changing due to the haphazard character of the evacuation. Over 18,000 buildings were destroyed by the fire, including 13,631 single residence buildings.

As of Thursday, dozens of evacuees remain camped in tents outside the Chico Walmart, where they have faced near-freezing temperatures at night and are now at risk of flooding from the rains. Hundreds more remain at evacuation centers across Butte County, where an outbreak of the non-fatal norovirus has infected at least 145 people and hospitalized dozens.

Also on Thursday, an estimated 15,000 evacuees were served Thanksgiving dinner by more than 50 volunteers, mostly at Chico State University.

In the aftermath of the Camp Fire, conditions in Paradise and across Butte County are ripe for devastating debris flows in the coming period, possibly as early as Friday. Weather forecasts predicted four to six inches of rain between Wednesday and Saturday,

with the majority coming between Thursday and Friday afternoon. This prompted the National Weather Service to issue a flash flood watch throughout north central California, alerting nearly one million residents to the danger of flash floods.

Current weather forecasts predicted as much as five inches of rain and winds exceeding 45 miles per hour would hit Paradise overnight Thursday. Paradise was the epicenter of the Camp Fire, and is situated in the Sierra Nevada foothills at an elevation of 1,778 feet. Similar to the rainstorm that hit southern California last January after the Thomas Fire, which led to debris flows that killed at least 21, there is the potential for further devastation throughout the Butte County region.

During a wildfire, burning vegetation releases gases that permeate into the soil, causing the roots to weaken. The gas then cools and solidifies, forming a waxy, water-repellent layer on the surface of the ground. If rain arrives at a sufficient intensity, the water rushes downhill and causes the topsoil to break loose, sending rocks, trees and mud downhill, at times exceeding speeds of 35 miles per hour. After the storm, a thick, hydrophobic layer is left behind, which can last for years based on the intensity of the fire.

Thus, the danger of debris flows now exists throughout California, including in Mendocino and Redding in northern California, and in the regions hit by the Woolsey, Thomas and other wildfires in southern California. In the coming years, all it will take are rainstorms of sufficient intensity to provoke debris flows, and devastation will once again hit these areas.

Current forecasts by the Cal Fire Watershed Emergency Response Team (WERT) predict that debris flows will mostly be confined to areas east of Paradise, and will not impact the larger cities of Chico and Oroville, where most Camp Fire evacuees have fled for

shelter. Nevertheless, weather phenomena are difficult to predict, and the danger exists that these cities could be impacted.

Beyond the immediate risk of debris flows, there is the potential for devastating long-term environmental impacts from the runoff of ash into the surrounding ecosystem, including the nearby Feather River and its tributaries, which are a key breeding ground for chinook salmon, an endangered keystone species in the state. The ash from burned structures, which is laden with toxic heavy metals, will also seep into the region's aquifers, with untold health ramifications for future generations.

In addition, the rainfall will compound the difficulties faced by the search and rescue workers combing through the areas hit by the Camp Fire to look for those that were killed by the fire. Already, this process has been extremely difficult given the intensity of the fire, with over 500 volunteers gradually finding remains of those that died.

At a recent press conference, Brian Ferreira, rescue squad officer for California Task Force 4, spoke on the impact the rain will have on their search operations: "It's going to consolidate the material and make it more dense. And it's going to present much more like soil. So anything we find or hope to find that's still there, it's going to make a difficult task [...] that much more difficult."

Although the exact number of homes searched prior to the rain has not been made public, there were still many neighborhoods that had not been searched, raising the possibility that many victims' remains could be washed away. On this, Ferreira commented: "It's out of our hands at that point. We're going to go as hard as we can, as long as we can, until we can't go anymore."

While the total number of fatalities may never be known, the Camp Fire already ranks as the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in the state's history. In every respect, it is a product of corporate negligence and government malfeasance.

The initial starting point for the fire is suspected to be a downed PG&E power line at the Poe Dam outside Paradise, which rapidly spread westward due to the high winds and drought conditions in the region, itself a product of corporate-induced climate change. There was no citywide fire warning system in place, with

most residents learning of the fire by phone call from a relative or friend, or witnessing the fire approach firsthand.

If PG&E is indeed found to be responsible for the Camp Fire, it will be the latest in a long line of catastrophic wildfires for which the company is guilty of producing through cost-cutting measures. Placing investor profits above public safety, PG&E and all the major utility companies utilize hazardous wooden above-ground electrical infrastructure, and have continually cut maintenance and repair costs for decades. Meanwhile, the Democratic-controlled state government in California passed a bill in September designed to prevent the bankruptcy of utility companies found responsible for starting deadly wildfires.



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