

# Hundreds of thousands evacuated, more than two million without power as fires continue in California

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Over fifteen fires burned throughout California Monday, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to evacuate. The fires prompted the third electrical power cut in the month of October and the largest in the state's history.

Record dryness combined with fierce northerly winds have created ideal conditions for wildfires throughout the state. Large sections of Northern California are on a "red flag" alert, while the entirety of coastal Southern California has been placed on a "fire watch."

The largest fire continues to be the Kincade Fire in Sonoma County, north of San Francisco, which grew and lost containment as winds picked up Sunday night. The fire has burned over 66,000 acres and led to the evacuation of over two hundred thousand people. At the time of this writing, the fire is headed south towards more populous towns north of Santa Rosa and is only five percent contained.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, a rapid-spreading wildfire broke out in the Santa Monica Mountains next to the 405 freeway, one of the city's major transit corridors. The "Getty" fire threatens the Getty Center, the wealthiest art institution in the world, housing priceless paintings such as van Gogh's "Irises" and portraits by Rembrandt.

At this point, at least six homes have been destroyed with many more in danger. "They were literally overwhelmed," said Los Angeles Fire Department Chief Ralph Terrazas of the responding firefighters. "They had to make some tough decisions on which houses they were able to protect."

On Tuesday, firefighters were able to finally make some progress in fighting the Tick Fire, in the Santa Clarita region north of Los Angeles, after it destroyed

29 structures and damaged another 44. The fire is now 78 percent contained. However, firefighters are bracing for further "Santa Ana" wind events that could heighten the danger once again.

Just south of the US-Mexican border, Santa Ana winds also caused deadly fires in the areas of Tecate and Ensenada in Baja California. At least eight fires caused major building damage and destruction and led to the deaths of at least three people. "This is the strongest Santa Ana wind-related fires ever to strike Baja California in its history," said Baja California's director of civil protection Antonio Rosquillas.

Due to the effects of climate change, fires have now become a regular occurrence. With only one exception, the ten deadliest fires in California state history have all taken place within the past 20 years.

The smoke from the fires is a serious health hazard to millions of residents across the state. The particulate matter dispersed in the air can cause long-term damage to the lungs and increases cancer risk.

Over two million people have already had their power shutoff by PG&E, the private company that holds a monopoly on Northern California's energy. On Monday evening, the company announced that high wind events on Tuesday may lead to up to an additional 3.8 million losing power.

In spite of their power-cuts, it seems that the company is nonetheless still responsible for the Kincade fire. A malfunction on the electrical lines at their Burned Mountain transmission tower likely sparked the fire.

November 8 will be the one-year anniversary of the Camp Fire, the deadliest wildfire in state history, which killed 85 civilians and completely obliterated the town

of Paradise, California, population 26,218. The fire was started by a faulty PG&E transmission line. The company declared bankruptcy two months later to escape more than \$30 billion in fire-related liabilities.

The bankruptcy—which was actively implemented not only by PG&E but also by state officials such as Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom—was specifically designed to avoid the cost of making wildfire victims whole and make sure that obligations to private bondholders, who are owed nearly \$17.5 billion by the company, were met.

PG&E executives were found to have enjoyed handsome compensation packages while the state of California burned. Its former CEO, Geisha Williams, was awarded \$9.8 million in direct pay in 2018, the same year as the Camp Fire. Chief Financial Officer Jason Wells received a total compensation of \$3.2 million during the same period.

The company has done nothing to maintain or upgrade its equipment. This week, it issued 20 preliminary reports of wind damage to its system despite the fact that none of the wind speeds approached anything on the order of gale force or hurricane winds. It warned that 32,000 miles of power lines must be inspected, meaning that those without power may be in the dark for several more days at the least.

In the case of the Camp Fire in Paradise, California last year, the *New York Times* reported that a live line broke free of a tower that was 25 years past what PG&E considered its “useful life.” The tower was erected 99 years earlier.

The value of the company’s stock has fallen by half since Thursday, and over 90 percent since the Camp Fire.

The irony is that the tanking of PG&E’s stock will only make it less able to complete the infrastructural renewal required to protect against these increasingly regular fire events. Meanwhile, Governor Newsom called on Warren Buffett to purchase the utility. Buffett specializes in cost cutting, layoffs, and “restructuring,” to make wayward companies profitable at the expense of workers and consumers.

Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area are two of the richest regions of the country. And yet, supposedly no money can be found to protect against increasingly regular fire events. It is not that the

technology does not exist to place powerlines underground or build electrical towers out of steel instead of wood. Rather, the ultra-wealthy cannot bother to pay.

Newsom held a press conference over the weekend blaming PG&E for years of “greed” and “mismanagement.” While no doubt true, the reality is that the Democrats are just as culpable. This past decade, California has been run by Democratic governors, Democratic legislatures, and Democratic mayors. During this same time, the state has seen a sharp decline of its public schools, an alarming increase in inequality, homelessness and poverty, while infrastructure—such as power, water, and public transit—languishes, unable to safely and affordably address residents’ needs.

Insurance companies, also wanting to keep profits elevated at the expense of the working class, are either increasing premiums or dropping coverage altogether for residents in areas at risk of fire. “We are seeing an increasing trend across California where people at risk of wildfires are being non-renewed by their insurer,” said state Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara. At least 350,000 residents had their policies deliberately not renewed by the insurance companies during 2019 alone.

The California Department of Insurance noted other cases of homeowner insurance premiums doubling or even quintupling from \$800 - \$1,000 to \$2,500 - \$5,000 per year, even in cases where homeowners performed extensive fire mitigating measures such as cutting back brush or investing in fire resistant roofing.



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