Late-January wildfire erupts near Big Sur, California

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A brushfire that began late Friday evening turned into a runaway wildfire near Big Sur, California. The cause of the blaze, which was first reported around 7:30 p.m. local time, remains unknown. The National Weather Service described the rapidly growing conflagration, dubbed the Colorado Fire, as "surreal."

Due to the impact of climate change, the wildfire "season" in California has been extended throughout the entire year. Conditions were primed for fire this month despite storms which brought heavy rains to the state in the last three months of 2021. The Colorado Fire swept through the area due to dry air, high pressure and high winds.

While late January is not the typical time of year for wildfires to spark, the winds involved have nonetheless created challenges for crews holding the perimeter, according to CalFire.

George Nunez, a CalFire captain, told the *New York Times* that he normally has 17 units but it was reduced to two when the official fire season ended on January 3. He said: "Everybody says that California has a year-round fire season. And this is just part of it."

Mandatory evacuations were issued on Palo Colorado Road, where the fire started, and evacuation advisories were in effect along Highway 1 at 10 p.m. The fire was mapped at 683 acres by the Fire Integrated Real-Time Intelligence System (FIRIS) aircraft at about 5 p.m. Saturday. A satellite overflight at 1:22 p.m. local time on Saturday showed that the fire had spread on the south side near Rocky Creek and on the northwest side southeast of Notleys Landing south of Palo Colorado Road.

By midnight on Saturday, the fire was 0% contained prompting officials to canvass door to door to ensure evacuation orders were being followed. Rocky Creek and Bixby, California were also being evacuated.

The iconic scenic Highway 1 was closed in both directions near the entrance to Andrew Molera State Park in Big Sur to Rio Road in Carmel. Winds as the fire started were gusting to around 25-30 mph in the area.

An evacuation shelter was opened in Carmel Middle School by the American Red Cross late on Friday evening for area residents who were given mandatory evacuation orders as the fire moved perilously close to the community.

Cecile Juliette, a spokesperson for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, told the Associated Press: "The fire lined up with the wind and the terrain and that gave the fire a lot of energy to make a big run.

"It's unusual to have fire this size here on the coast at the end of January. The fact that we had fire of this size is of great concern," she explained to the AP.

By Sunday evening, more than 30,000 customers in California were without power, according to PowerOutage.us, though the power was restored for most customers by Monday morning. The Monterey County Health Department issued a "boil water notice" until further notice for residents in the area impacted by the Colorado Fire due to likely damage to the water system infrastructure and loss of water pressure from power outages.

The Colorado Fire was 35 percent contained as of Monday, fire officials said.

The wildfire was blazing while Santa Ana winds kicked up in Southern California. These are treacherous high-speed winds that occasionally whip up and blow from the mountains to the coastline in Southern California and can cause wildfires to spread rapidly.

High wind warning advisories from the National Weather Service went into effect from the Sierra

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Nevada into Southern California on Saturday, with winds easing on Sunday across the region.

'Winds continue to create challenges for crews along the fire perimeter,' CalFire wrote in an update on its website. “Seasonable temperatures are expected much of this week and relative humidity values are forecast to increase Monday. Firefighters continue to strengthen control lines and mop-up hot spots.”

But no precipitation was in the forecast for the week as a stagnant air pattern grips the western United States. With high pressure sitting stagnant over the vast area, winds are forecast to be calm for the next few days, which will aid firefighters in containing the Colorado Fire.

At the end of September 2021, in California, there were 10 large fires burning nearly 2 million acres, none of which were fully contained at that time. According to CalFire, “In October, the state of California, especially in the Northern regions where most of the fires were located, received its first rain in over 200 days reducing the wildfire risk for much of the state.”

The 2021 fire season in northern California was so severe that CalFire made a special point of advising firefighters and the public in its September 26 Action Plan for the Fawn Fire that “Northern California continues to experience large fire activity and multiple team deployments and will likely experience an extended fire season. It is important to be mindful of and manage fatigue for all resources.”

Meteorological reports indicate that year-round wildfires have become common across the state and in the Pacific Northwest. A May 2021 article in the *San Jose Mercury News* confirmed that the California fire season now lasts 12 months.

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