

Extra Feature Story

Destructive Fires in Southern California Highlight Risks of Dry Season

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Families are beginning to return to the burnt remains of homes and melted cars after firefighters gained control of wildfires that raged through southern California, forcing thousands of people to flee last week.

Around 1,000 residences burnt to the ground and an estimated 50,000 residents evacuated, according to Reuters.

The fires began late on November 13, aided by high winds reaching 70 miles per hour at one point. Planes sprayed flame retardant on entire areas, but the communities were at the mercy of the winds.

A mobile home park in the northern Los Angeles suburb of Sylmar was razed by the fire and nearly 500 residences were incinerated. The Santa Barbara area fire swept through the ritzy community of Montecito.

The cause of the fires is still unknown, but Doug Lannon, a spokesman with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection told the Associated Press at least one of the fires was caused by human activity.

Fires increasingly frequent

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger told a press conference Sunday that the conditions in southern California made for a "perfect storm."

"With all these fires all over, this is usually what happens at this time of the year, when we have the perfect storm, which means basically we have high winds, high temperatures and very, very dry," Schwarzenegger said.

California is frequently hit by wildfires because of the dry climate, strong Santa Ana winds and real estate booms that have seen homes pop up in rural and wooded areas. Lightning striking parched hills in the southern California region is one of the ways fires often begin.

About a year ago, California experienced some of the worst fires in its history. Eight people died and more than a half million had to leave their homes. In June and July of this year, a series of about 2,000 fires raged across the state.

"It's gotten worse and worse every year. I can't keep track of them anymore," Capt. Leonard Grill, a 20-year veteran of the Riverside County Fire Department, told the AP.

California is not the only area that has suffered from severe wildfires. Last year more than 200 wild fires swept across parts of southeastern Europe, destroying homes and devouring woodland. In Greece, 65 people died because of the blazes.

Climate change and wildfires

While there is no direct evidence linking California's fires to climate change, forestry experts say that the risk of wildfires increase as temperatures rise and periods of draught become longer.

Earlier and warmer springs mean less snowpack, and an earlier snowmelt, allowing areas of California to dry out faster, lengthening the period of dangerous drought in the summer.

The peak time of melting snow is already about 10 to 15 days earlier in different parts of the West, reported the San Francisco Chronicle. A study published in 2006 in Science Magazine found the number of wildfires in southern California had quadrupled since 1986.

U.S. Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell said on November 8, 2008 that climate change is a great danger to the nation's forests.

"We've been seeing bigger fires, wilder fires, more intense fires," she said, reported the Sacramento Bee. "Fire seasons that start in January in the southern United States end in December in California – and then start all over again."

"We believe it's tied to ... climate change," Kimbell said.

Year round fire season

Schwarzenegger reiterated the point on ABC's "This Week" with George Stephanopoulos.

"Through global warming, we have now a fire season all year round," Schwarzenegger said on the Sunday news program.

Some scientists also say the fires contribute to the climate problem due to the large amount of pollutants, carbon dioxide and methane released into the air.

"It's a vicious circle," Gabriele Pfister, a scientist with the National Center for Atmospheric Research told the San Francisco Chronicle.

"Global warming leads to dryness, more fires, more health effects, more dead forests and less vegetation to take up the carbon. And this all adds to more global warming."

-- Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra

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