

# Winds whip California fires as they spread south

December 8 2017, by Veronique Dupont, Robyn Beck

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Firefighters battle the Lilac fire in Bonsall, California on December 7, 2017

Unrelenting winds fanned towering flames Friday in southern California, where hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee multiple devastating fires in the Los Angeles area and new outbreaks near San Diego.

Hundreds of structures including multi-million dollar mansions have been destroyed as thousands of firefighters battle wind-fueled wildfires

on six different fronts.

Black smoke billowed through the region, gagging residents who ventured outdoors.

"I've never seen anything like this and I've lived here 20 years," Judy Herman, 76, told AFP.

Herman was relieved to find her home in Murrieta, east of Los Angeles, still intact. It was part of the huge evacuation zone forced by the "Liberty" fire—which included many ranches in the area, where rodeos are popular.

Meanwhile, since erupting in Ventura county late Monday, the so-called "Thomas" fire has ravaged 132,000 acres, an area nearly triple the size of Washington DC.

With gusts of up to 60 miles per hour, the turbulent seasonal Santa Ana winds whipped the fire on Friday, spitting embers and creating "extreme fire danger." A red alert was extended into the weekend due to expected low humidity.

Despite the fires' intensity, authorities have reported only one fatality so far, an unidentified person whose body was found overnight, according to Tim Lohman of the Ventura County Sheriff's Office.



Beyond a wall of burned Cypress trees, a helicopter drops water over farms and homes in Bonsall, California

Further south in San Diego county the "Lilac" fire was ballooning at a dangerous rate, charring more than 4,000 acres after igniting Thursday morning and triggering a new wave of evacuations as it encroached on the university town of Santa Barbara.

## **Racehorses and celebrities**

The plumes of smoke and flame left at least four people in the area injured from burns or smoke inhalation.

Flames also claimed the lives of more than two dozen racehorses after tearing through eight barns at the normally serene San Luis Rey training center, in the town of Bonsall, where some 500 horses were stabled, the

California Horse Racing Board said in a statement.

"75 per cent of the stables were consumed, the fire was spreading so fast ... they couldn't evacuate all the horses," fire chief Ross Fowler said.



Firefighters comb through smoldering ash in the remains of dozens of homes destroyed by the Lilac Fire in Fallbrook, California

"It's hard when horses are scared, they don't comply, they are heavy, they can hurt you," he added.

In Fallbrook, northern San Diego county, the scene was apocalyptic. With ravaged trees horizontal and houses destroyed, everything was black as firefighters inspected for possible sources for a new blaze.

Taking advantage of a lull in the wind, they also blasted water on homes affected in both towns.

Meanwhile, firefighters also got something of a handle on the Skirball fire in Los Angeles, which had spewed rivers of flames over 500 acres in the densely populated area of Bel Air, producing apocalyptic scenes as the inferno engulfed entire hillsides.

Multi-million dollar mansions were destroyed in the neighborhood, home to many celebrities. Media tycoon Rupert Murdoch has a \$30 million estate, the Moraga Bel Air Winery, there.



Exhausted firefighters have their first rest in over 20 hours since starting to fight the Lilac Fire in Bonsall, California

## **State of emergency**

Another Los Angeles county blaze, the Rye fire, has consumed more than 6,000 acres and was 35 percent contained, while the Creek fire—the largest wildfire menacing the LA region—had grown to more than 15,000 acres and devastated some 60 structures, half of them homes.

The Liberty wildfire in Riverside county east of Los Angeles, America's second largest city, has scorched 300 acres and was just five percent contained.

California Governor Jerry Brown declared a state emergency for Santa Barbara, San Diego, Los Angeles and Ventura counties, while US President Donald Trump issued a state of emergency in California, authorizing the release of federal funds to "help alleviate the hardship and suffering that the emergency may inflict on the local population."

However, several evacuation orders were lifted Friday afternoon.

This has been California's deadliest year ever for wildfires. More than 40 people died in October when fires swept through the state's wine-producing counties north of San Francisco.



The Thomas Fire burns a hillside behind Lake Casitas in Ventura, California on December 8, 2017

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