

California wildfires: what we know

December 12 2017, by Javier Tovar



FILLMORE, CA - DECEMBER 07: A firefighting helicopter works the Thomas Fire on December 7, 2017 near Fillmore, California. Strong Santa Ana winds are pushing multiple wildfires across the region, expanding across tens of thousands of acres and destroying hundreds of homes and structures. David McNew/Getty Images/AFP

It's been a week since southern California has been charred by a devastating wave of wildfires, blasted by almost hurricane force winds.

Vast areas have been destroyed, hundreds of thousands of people have

been evacuated and thousands of firefighters are working around the clock.

The future of the infernos is at the mercy of the wind.

The biggest concern is Thomas, which broke out last Monday and has already destroyed an area five times larger than the US capital Washington and threatens Pacific coast towns like Carpinteria, Summerland and Montecito.

Here is a review of the present situation.

Number of fires

Six were registered during the week: in addition to Thomas, in Ventura County, there were three in Los Angeles (Creek, Rye, Skirball), Lilac in San Diego; and Liberty in Riverside.

Other than Thomas, almost all are contained and the evacuation orders have already been lifted. But there have been long hours of panic. Los Angeles evacuated 150,000 people. Skirball —85 percent controlled—affected the exclusive neighborhood of Bel-Air and millions of dollars of mansions were caught in the flames.

The losses have not yet been calculated.

Lilac, which engulfed a rural area with many stables, forced hundreds of horses had to be evacuated. Just over two dozen perished.

Extent of Thomas' damage

It still remains to be seen how much harm Thomas will do. The [fire](#)

continues to grow and threatens nearby areas. In one week it wiped out 23,000 acres (93,000 hectares) and "severe weather conditions" could lead to "significant growth," according to the latest California firefighters bulletin (Cal Fire).

More than 800 buildings have been destroyed, including 644 homes, while almost 6,400 officials work to try to contain the flames.

Evacuation orders remain standing in areas of Ventura, Ojai, Carpinteria, Montecito and Santa Barbara.

Victims

Despite its hellish intensity, which has left behind scenes reminiscent of a moonscape in many areas, authorities so far have reported one fatality—a 70-year-old woman who died in a car accident while fleeing from the flames in the Thomas area.

Tens of thousands had to leave their homes, some ending up in shelters opened by the authorities and the Red Cross.

Weather forecast

The causes of the fires are under investigation. But whatever they are, it is the hurricane-strength winds and the low humidity that cause them to spread over huge [areas](#) of land at an amazingly alarming speed.

Eric Boldt, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service (NWS), explained to AFP that even when the wind dies down, the drought conditions complicate everything.

The fire is already the biggest disaster in California's history, but Boldt

believes he has the potential to climb to the top spot.

Financial losses

There is no exact figure for the losses from this fire wave that has not even ended.

The California Department of Insurance told AFP that the calculation is the product of the figures from insurance companies. As the fires are not over yet, there are people who do not even know if they lost their homes or businesses and did not activate their insurance.

He also explained that losses may not be known in wealthy neighborhoods like Bel-Air because those million-dollar properties are not insured with a current policy. The agency estimated the losses from the ferocious fires in the wine region in October to be \$9.4 billion dollars.

Global warming

California Governor Jerry Brown warned Saturday that because of climate change, the most populous US state is more vulnerable to [forest fires](#), which in turn are becoming the "new normal."

Prior to this season's fires, California experienced more than five years of severe drought.

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