

Largest wildfire eyes communities northwest of Los Angeles (Update)

December 7 2017, by Amanda Lee Myers And Andrew Dalton



Motorists on Highway 101 watch flames from the Thomas fire leap above the roadway north of Ventura, Calif., on Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. As many as five fires have closed highways, schools and museums, shut down production of TV series and cast a hazardous haze over the region. About 200,000 people were under evacuation orders. No deaths and only a few injuries were reported. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Flames from the largest and most destructive Southern California

wildfire churned toward coastal and mountain communities northwest of Los Angeles on Thursday, disrupting travel on a major highway and triggering more evacuations.

A more favorable wind forecast still called for potentially dangerous gusts, but ones not likely to approach historic levels forecasters had feared, according to the National Weather Service.

"This is good news for the fire crews as the winds will not be driven quite as vigorously," a weather service statement said.

Calmer overnight conditions helped crews protect the Ventura County resort town of Ojai (OH-hi), where most of the 7,000 residents were under new evacuation orders following a burst of wind late Wednesday.

At Ojai Valley Community Hospital, officials said they moved non-ambulatory patients to another hospital as a precaution. The hospital said in a statement that several dozen patients still remained there Thursday.

A woman was found dead in a wrecked car in an evacuation zone near the city of Santa Paula, where the Ventura County fire began Monday night, but officials could not immediately say if the accident was fire-related.

To the west, firefighters prevented another disaster at tiny La Conchita, a seaside hamlet below coastal bluffs that in the past have unleashed destructive landslides, including one that killed 10 people in 2005.



A mansion that survived a wildfire sits on a hilltop in the Bel Air district of Los Angeles Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. A dangerous new wildfire erupted in the tony Bel Air area of Los Angeles early Wednesday as firefighters battled three other destructive blazes across Southern California. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

A short distance up the coast, evacuations were ordered in Santa Barbara County for several hundred residents of the beach city of Carpinteria.

Officials intermittently closed U.S. 101 for more than a dozen miles along the coast, cutting off the major route for several hours as fire charred heavy brush along lanes.

In tiny Faria Beach, homeowner Steve Andruszkewicz and his wife used a garden hose to spray palm trees to keep them from burning.

"We're leaving," he said. "We've been packed up since Tuesday. We left

Tuesday night and stayed down at our son's house. We came back yesterday, stayed the night, but this has got me worrying because of the blowing embers."

Resident Joseph Ruffner said he was staying.



Flames from the Thomas fire burn above a truck on Highway 101 north of Ventura, Calif., on Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

"We evacuated the night before last, came home and the fire was down in that direction," he said pointing north. "And this morning there was a wall of fire back right over here. And I didn't think it was no big deal, but it's coming back to burn what it didn't burn yesterday."

Southern California has been hit hard by four major fires that have put

tens of thousands of people under evacuation orders and destroyed nearly 200 homes and buildings, a figure that is almost certain to grow.

Melissa Rosenzweig, 47, was briefly back home Wednesday after evacuating from her Ventura house, which has been spared so far while most on her street had burned in the largest and most destructive of the region's fires. She and her husband were about to evacuate again, hoping they will get lucky twice as the new winds arrive.

"Heck yeah I'm still worried," Rosenzweig said. "We're very grateful but I know we're not out of the woods."

In what may have been an early sign of the 140-square-mile fire getting new life, several thousand new evacuations were ordered Wednesday night in Ojai, a small town with resorts, galleries, eateries and wilderness activities that serves as a getaway destination.



The Getty Center is seen after a wildfire swept through Los Angeles' Bel Air neighborhood Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. The Getty Center, the \$1 billion home

to the J. Paul Getty Museum and related organizations, stands on the west side of Sepulveda Pass. The fire did not immediately cross the wide expanse of the pass to the Getty side, but if it had, the facility is prepared. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

In the exclusive Bel Air section of Los Angeles, where multimillion-dollar houses give the rich and famous sweeping views, authorities tallied four homes destroyed and 11 damaged by a fire that erupted before dawn Wednesday. Firefighters watched for remaining hotspots Thursday.

Flames there also burned a wine storage shed at media mogul Rupert Murdoch's 16-acre (6.5-hectare) Moraga Vineyards estate and appeared to have damaged about 7 acres (2.8 hectares) of vines, a spokeswoman said.

Across the wide Interstate 405 freeway from the Bel Air fire, the Getty Center art complex was closed to protect its collection from smoke damage. Many schools across Los Angeles were closed because of poor air quality and classes were canceled at 265 schools Thursday.

Total damage tallies for all of the wildfires have lagged as fire agencies have focused on battling the flames. Early on, authorities in Ventura County said 150 structures were destroyed there, but that number was expected to increase substantially.

Damage assessments also remained incomplete for two fires in northern Los Angeles County. Losses from one of those fires included more than two dozen horses that became trapped in a barn in the Sylmar area of Los Angeles.



Crystal Shore look over the wildfire damaged neighbors home along Via San Anselmo in the Sylmar area of Los Angeles Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)



Wildfire survivors Marolyn Romero-Sim left, and Hugo Romero-Rodriguez, middle, and their 9-year-old daughter, Milagros, sit inside the evacuation center at the Ventura County Fairgrounds in Ventura, Calif. Their RV burned up with all their possessions in Ventura, Calif. Wind-driven fires have raced through California communities for the second time in two months, leaving hundreds of homes feared lost and uprooted tens of thousands of people. The most damaging fire is in Ventura County northwest of Los Angeles, where more than 100 square miles (259 sq. kilometers) and numerous homes have burned. (AP Photo/Amanda Lee Myers)



Flames from the Thomas fire burn above traffic on Highway 101 north of Ventura, Calif., on Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



A firefighter mops up at a home consumed by a wildfire in the Bel Air district of Los Angeles Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. A dangerous new wildfire erupted in the tony Bel Air area of Los Angeles early Wednesday as firefighters battled three other destructive blazes across Southern California. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



The Getty Center lies shrouded in smoke as seen from the Bel Air district of Los

Angeles after the Skirball wildfire swept through Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. The Getty Center, the \$1 billion home to the J. Paul Getty Museum and related organizations, stands on the west side of Sepulveda Pass. The fire erupted on the east side of the pass, but the plume of smoke curled west, over the Getty. But the Getty would have been prepared even if flames had threatened. Officials have described how fire protection was designed into the facility by architect Richard Meier, including the thickness of the walls and doors to compartmentalize any fire. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)



The Getty Center lies shrouded in smoke as seen from Casiano Road in the Bel Air district of Los Angeles after the Skirball wildfire swept through, Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017. A destructive wildfire that erupted early Wednesday burned not far from The Getty Center, the \$1 billion home to the J. Paul Getty Museum and related organizations that overlooks Los Angeles from a perch on the southern slope of the Santa Monica Mountains. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

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