

Wildfires raze dozens of homes in New Zealand

October 5 2020



Up to 50 homes were destroyed by a wildfire which swept through the picturesque New Zealand village of Lake Ohau

Wildfires have destroyed up to 50 homes in New Zealand, authorities announced Monday, saying it was a miracle no one was hurt as "a wall of orange" razed most of a remote South Island village.

The blaze began in a mountain forest early Sunday morning and, fanned by [strong winds](#), swept through the village of Lake Ohau, forcing residents to flee for their lives.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand (FENZ) said the unpredictable winds made fighting the [fire](#) "challenging" and by Monday afternoon it had burned 4,600 hectares (18 square miles) of land.

Waitaki District mayor Gary Kircher said the tiny Lake Ohau community had been devastated.

"Of the 60 or 70 houses, we believe that the majority have gone," he told Radio New Zealand.

"The reality is that it's a minor miracle no one has been harmed. If it had been another 15-20 minutes it would have been a very different story."

Kircher described how residents awoke to find an inferno bearing down on them.

"I talked to a gentleman who got up to his dog (barking) in the early hours, opened his door and there was this wall of orange," he said.

"He was the one that set off the town fire alarm and helped to wake people... there's certainly some scary tales about how close it came to being an absolute disaster with fatalities."

Wildfires are relatively common on the South Island at this time of the year but the scale and intensity of the Ohau fire have been unusual.

New Zealand wildfires



Map of New Zealand locating the village of Lake Ohau where wildfires have destroyed dozens of homes, according to authorities on Monday.

'War zone'

Village resident Hugh Spiers, who lost his home, said the ferocious blaze was "surreal" and more akin to the huge bushfires that regularly erupt in Australia than a regular New Zealand blaze.

"The wind was so strong and the flames and the smoke and the sparks and the embers, it was just like what you see in the bush fires in Australia," he told TVNZ.

By Monday afternoon the fire front had moved far enough from the village to allow evacuated residents a brief trip back to assess the damage.

Civil Defence Minister Peeni Henare, who accompanied them, described seeing burned out cars and gutted homes.

"The term I've heard used to describe it is a war zone," he told reporters.

"It's clear to me that there's no rhyme or reason when it comes to fire, one house is affected, the neighbour isn't... you can feel a sense of loss."

FENZ said 11 helicopters and eight fire crews were attempting to contain the flames.



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It said investigators were examining the cause of the blaze, amid reports it was ignited by an electrical arc from overhead power lines.

With light rain forecast for the next 24 hours, there were hopes it would be under control by Tuesday night.

New Zealand this year experienced its warmest winter on record, which government science body NIWA said was consistent with a long-term trend of rising temperatures linked to [climate change](#).

University of Auckland environmental science expert, professor George Perry, said it was difficult to attribute a specific event such as the Lake Ohau fire to climate change.

But he said New Zealand had experienced more large wildfires that usual in recent years, pointing to changes in the three main factors affecting wildfires—fuel, climate and ignition sources.

"We would expect more such events under climate change especially as conditions become warmer and drier, and we see more droughts," he told AFP.

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