

California wind, and fire danger, hits unprecedented high (Update)

December 6 2017, by Amanda Lee Myers And Andrew Dalton



Homes stand along the beach as the sun is visible through thick smoke from a wildfire Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017, in Ventura, Calif. A dramatic new wildfire erupted in Los Angeles early Wednesday as firefighters battled three other destructive blazes across Southern California. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Southern California has felt yellow wind, orange wind, and red wind. But never purple wind. Until now.

The color-coded system showing the expected strength of the winds driving the region's fierce wildfires has reached uncharted territory, pushing past red, which means "high" into the color that means "extreme."

"The forecast for tomorrow is purple," said Ken Pimlott, director at the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. "We've never used purple before."

Southern California has already been hit hard by three major fires that have put tens of thousands of people under evacuation orders and destroyed at nearly 200 homes and buildings, a figure that is almost certain to grow.

But the hard-won progress of firefighters could be erased Thursday.

"We're talking winds that can surface that can be 80 miles an hour," Pimlott said. "These will be winds that there will no ability to fight fires."

Such winds can instantly turn a tiny fire into a large one, or carry embers that spark new fires miles away.

Millions of cellphones buzzed loudly Tuesday night from San Diego to Santa Barbara with a sound that usually means an Amber Alert, but this time meant a rare weather warning for strong winds making extreme fire danger.



Two spectators watch as a wildfire burns along the 101 Freeway Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017, in Ventura, Calif. Raked by ferocious Santa Ana winds, explosive wildfires northwest of Los Angeles and in the city's foothills burned a psychiatric hospital and scores of homes and other structures Tuesday and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Officials hope the electronic push will keep the whole region alert and keep the death toll from the week's fires at zero.

Melissa Rosenzweig, 47, was briefly back home Tuesday 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 late Tuesday night in Ojai, a town of artists and resorts. The blaze had been creeping there already, but an increase in winds pushed it close enough for many more to flee.

The wilder winds could easily send make new fires explode too, as one did Wednesday in Los Angeles' exclusive Bel-Air section, where a fire consumed multimillion-dollar houses that give the rich and famous sweeping views of Los Angeles.



A wildfire threatens homes as it burns along the 101 Freeway Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017, in Ventura, Calif. Raked by ferocious Santa Ana winds, explosive wildfires northwest of Los Angeles and in the city's foothills burned a psychiatric hospital and scores of homes and other structures Tuesday and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Little flame was visible by late Tuesday, but in the morning fire exploded on the steep slopes of Sepulveda Pass, closing a section of heavily traveled Interstate 405 and destroying four homes.

Flames 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 I-405 freeway from the 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.

Back in the beachside city of Ventura, the fire killed more than two dozen horses at a stable and had destroyed at least 150 structures, a number that was expected to get far bigger as firefighters are able to assess losses.

Air tankers that had been grounded much of the week because of high winds flew on Wednesday, dropping flame retardant. Firefighters rushed to attack the fires before winds picked up again.

"We're basically in an urban firefight in Ventura, where if you can keep that house from burning, you might be able to slow the fire down," said Tim Chavez, a fire behavior specialist at the blaze. "But that's about it."



A truck drives along the 101 Freeway as a wildfire continues to burn Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017, in Ventura, Calif. Raked by ferocious Santa Ana winds, explosive wildfires northwest of Los Angeles and in the city's foothills burned a psychiatric hospital and scores of homes and other structures Tuesday and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



A car drives along the Pacific Coast Highway as a wildfire continues to burn Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017, in Ventura, Calif. Raked by ferocious Santa Ana winds, explosive wildfires northwest of Los Angeles and in the city's foothills burned a psychiatric hospital and scores of homes and other structures Tuesday and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



Firefighters gather in front of a residential area as a wildfire burns along the 101 Freeway Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017, in Ventura, Calif. Raked by ferocious Santa Ana winds, explosive wildfires northwest of Los Angeles and in the city's foothills burned a psychiatric hospital and scores of homes and other structures Tuesday and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



A wildfire burns along the 101 Freeway Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017, in Ventura, Calif. Raked by ferocious Santa Ana winds, explosive wildfires northwest of Los Angeles and in the city's foothills burned a psychiatric hospital and scores of homes and other structures Tuesday and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



Flames consume a structure as a wildfire burns in Casitas Springs, Calif., on Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017. Wind-driven fires tore through California communities Tuesday for the second time in two months, leaving hundreds of homes feared lost and uprooting tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



Traffic moves along the Highway 33 as a wildfires continues to burn Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017, near Oak View, Calif. Raked by ferocious Santa Ana winds, explosive wildfires northwest of Los Angeles and in the city's foothills burned a psychiatric hospital and scores of homes and other structures Tuesday and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



Flames from a wildfire advance down a hillside near the Springs of Life Church in Casitas Springs, Calif., on Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017. Wind-driven fires tore through California communities Tuesday for the second time in two months, leaving hundreds of homes feared lost and uprooting tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



A wildfire continues to burn as its red glow is reflected on the beach Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017, in Ventura, Calif. Raked by ferocious Santa Ana winds, explosive wildfires northwest of Los Angeles and in the city's foothills burned a psychiatric hospital and scores of homes Tuesday and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



Two people walk along the beach with a dog as a wildfire burns in distance Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017, in Ventura, Calif. Raked by ferocious Santa Ana winds, explosive wildfires northwest of Los Angeles and in the city's foothills burned a psychiatric hospital and scores of homes and other structures Tuesday and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)



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A woman cries as she covers her face near her destroyed home a wildfire swept through Ventura, Calif., Tuesday, Dec. 5, 2017. (Daniel Dreifuss via AP)

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Citation: California wind, and fire danger, hits unprecedented high (Update) (2017, December 6) retrieved 24 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-12-wildfire-siege-southern-california.html>

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