

Fires ravage Southern California

Jack Cody
2 August 2010

Three separate fires burned all last week in Southern California's Los Angeles and Kern Counties, setting off the state's fire season.

The so-called "West" fire, which broke out around 3 p.m. on Tuesday near the city of Tehachapi in Kern County, has consumed at least 30 homes, forced the evacuation of at least 150 more, and burned nearly 1,700 acres of land. As of Sunday, the fire was 94 percent contained.

The "Bull" fire began Monday in the northern part of Kern County and has destroyed eight homes and forced the evacuation of a juvenile detention center. The Bull fire has engulfed more land than the West fire, with over 15,000 acres of Sequoia National Forest already destroyed. Being in a less populated area, however, the Bull fire has had less human impact than the West fire. As of Sunday, the Bull fire was 85 percent contained.

Evacuated residents of the Old West Ranch community near Tehachapi fear the worst for their abandoned homes. The refugees are being sheltered at Tehachapi High School. Although 150 homes were evacuated, a local resident named Butchko told reporters that more were likely affected, as not everyone in the community had addresses.

Kern County is one of the poorest in the state, with 15.7 percent of the population officially unemployed as of May 2010. The county houses the city of Bakersfield, as well as several other smaller cities and farming communities, all of which have been severely affected by the economic crisis.

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has declared a state of emergency in Kern County. Firefighters have been sent from throughout the state to assist in fighting these two fires. With the aid of the fire departments of other local counties, approximately 3,000 firefighters and emergency crewmembers are working to contain the Kern County fires. Two firefighters have been injured.

A third fire broke out on Thursday near the town of Palmdale in rural northern Los Angeles County. The fire started in the brush of the hills north of Angeles National Forest and rapidly spread north to the suburban communities in Los Angeles County's high desert. About 1,200 homes were evacuated in Leona Valley. Having consumed at least two structures, as of Sunday the fire had been 87 percent contained.

The fire season has become more extreme in recent years, due to a combination of unusually dry summers, possibly the result of global climate change, and the Santa Ana Winds, which can blow up to 75 miles per hour, fanning the flames and spreading hot coals across the dry terrain. After a delayed fire season, due to a long spring, recent heat waves throughout the state have created hazardous fire conditions, as the outbreak of fires this week has clearly demonstrated.

While the number and intensity of fires have increased in recent years, the ability of the state to effectively contain wildfires has diminished considerably from California's recurrent fiscal crisis. Understaffing and lack of resources in the various county fire departments contributed to the level of destruction when at least 16 wildfires erupted nearly simultaneously throughout Southern California in October of 2007. In some areas, understaffed fire departments did not arrive until hours after flames had entered suburban areas. Officials from Orange County, the sixth richest county in the state, acknowledged having staffed its fire department below national standards.

Last year's dismal response to the Station fire, one of the largest wildfires in California history, proved that the state failed to learn its lesson from the 2007 fires. Schwarzenegger and the Democrat-controlled state legislature cut \$27 million from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection in the last fiscal year alone, including failing to renew a contract

for the use of the DC-10 fire retardant bomber, which experts say is the single most effective firefighting tool.

California fire departments once again come into the fire season unprepared. The trend of chronically underfunding fire departments is unlikely to change soon, as the state is once again in a fiscal emergency. Facing a \$20 billion deficit, the Forestry and Fire Protection department will likely see a new round of cuts for the coming fiscal year.

In 2007 and 2009, the most extreme fires did not occur until September or October. Last week's fires threaten to be the beginning of a severe fire season, and one for which the state is woefully unprepared.



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