

Fires ravage Los Angeles area, killing 5 and forcing mass evacuations

Joshua Rodriguez
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At least five people are dead and many more are injured due to climate change-fueled fires that have exploded and expanded across the Los Angeles metropolitan area, threatening the lives of millions of people. The death toll is expected to rise as the fires are currently at zero percent containment, according to the California Department of Forest & Fire Protection (CalFire).

January has typically been the peak of California's rainy season which eases the threat of wildfires, but climate change is extending the fire season into a nearly year-round threat for the region. As climate scientist Jennifer Francis explained Tuesday to *Bloomberg*, rising Pacific Ocean temperatures have made it more likely for longer and drier conditions to prevail along the West Coast. "These ocean heat waves are becoming stronger and larger because of heat trapped by increased human-generated greenhouse gases, so these persistent and unusual weather patterns will probably become more common," Francis noted.

There have been numerous reports across social media platforms of people trapped and unable to escape. As of Wednesday evening, CalFire reported seven separate wildfires that had burned nearly 27,000 acres since Tuesday.

Scenes of chaos unfolded over several Southern California cities beginning Tuesday night after numerous fires in Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties erupted in the late evening and spread throughout the night.

The Palisades fire started on Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. and then quickly ballooned to around 3,000 acres by the evening, prompting the evacuation of roughly 30,000 residents with more than 10,000 homes under threat. The Eaton fire a few miles away started the same Tuesday at 6:23 p.m. and ballooned to over 200 acres by 7:12 p.m. prompting similar evacuation orders.

ABC7's Josh Haskell, reporting from the Pacific

Palisades Wednesday afternoon, estimated that between "50 to 75 percent" of the neighborhood was destroyed. "I cannot explain the level of devastation that I just saw," he said.

On Wednesday, the mayor of Pasadena, Victor Gordo, ordered over 100,000 residents to evacuate and warned another 100,000 they should be prepared to evacuate. He admitted that "hundreds of homes" had already been destroyed. Thousands have also been ordered to evacuate in Santa Monica.

There is no question more could have been done to prevent loss of life and property. The National Weather Service issued a Red Flag Warning for the area on Monday, January 6, labeling the incoming Santa Ana winds as a "life-threatening and destructive windstorm."

"We specifically issued a particularly dangerous situation, that we really rarely issue," meteorologist Sebastian Westerink with the National Weather Service said.

"We're warning of a particularly dangerous situation where we will have severe, widespread strong winds, accompanied with very dry air," he added. "We'll have some pretty dangerous conditions, *especially in that time frame tomorrow [Wednesday], 7 AM to 1 PM.*" (Emphasis added)

Winds as high as 84 mph (135 kmph) were reported throughout the San Gabriel Mountains during the Red Flag Warning, with averages of 40 to 50 mph (25-31 kmph) in the surrounding areas.

Over 1,100 structures and homes have been destroyed or burned so far. Over 819,000 customers were without power in Los Angeles County on Wednesday. In neighboring Orange County, another 162,000 were without power, followed by 84,550 in San Bernardino and 72,673 in Ventura counties, according to poweroutage.us.

In a Wednesday morning press conference, Los Angeles

County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone admitted that despite warnings from the National Weather Service, the explosive fires caught local authorities by surprise. He said that they were prepared for one or two major fires but not “this type of widespread disaster.”

He said, “There are not enough firefighters in LA County to address four separate fires of this magnitude.” Marrone said all 29 county fire departments have “no fire apparatus or additional personnel to spare.”

On Tuesday night, for the first time in 19 years, the Los Angeles Fire Department began a “recall operation” imploring off-duty crews to report their availability to assist in firefighting. Firefighters from surrounding counties and states, including from Nevada, Oregon and Washington, have been dispatched in an attempt to contain the infernos.

The fires recall the harrowing experiences of both the Lahaina Fire in Maui, Hawaii, in 2023 and the Camp Fire in Paradise, California, in 2018. In both cases the combination of government neglect and corporate indifference towards public safety, in addition to profit-driven climate change, played a key role in the substantial loss of life and property that was incurred.

In the most recent fires, despite the risk posed by wildfire smoke around the area, only 10 percent of all the schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District have been ordered to close down, while millions more continued to show up for work. Students at UCLA reported having to attend class in-person on Wednesday despite horrendous air quality conditions that blackened the normally sunny Southern California skies.

This recalls the same callous attitude governments and corporations took in 2023 when over 115 million US and Canadian workers and students were forced to labor and attend school even as massive wildfires in Northern Canada scorched forests, spreading toxic fumes as far as New York City, Texas and Florida.

Usual claims that there is “no money” to invest in infrastructure and social services that would prevent and mitigate foreseeable disasters hold no water in California, home to 186 billionaires, the most of any US state and 54 more than all of Germany. There is plenty of money, but it is wasted on the rich and their police forces.

On social media, many took note that in the latest budget proposal submitted by the mayor of Los Angeles, Democrat Karen Bass, funding for the Fire Department was slashed by \$17.6 million, while the notorious Los Angeles Police Department received a \$126 million *increase* to its budget, bringing it to over \$2.14 billion.

While the fires have ravaged some of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the Los Angeles area, there is no question that the damage could have been averted had the resources been allocated.

This is best exemplified by the fact that the Getty Villa, a multibillion-dollar museum located in the Pacific Palisades, remained unscathed during the inferno.

“Fortunately, Getty had made extensive efforts to clear brush from the surrounding area as part of its fire mitigation efforts throughout the year,” Katherine E. Fleming, CEO and president of the J. Paul Getty Trust, said in a January 8 statement.

“Additional fire prevention measures in place at the Villa include water storage on-site,” she wrote. “Irrigation was immediately deployed throughout the grounds Tuesday morning. Museum galleries and library archives were sealed off from smoke by state-of-the-art air handling systems. The double-walled construction of the galleries also provides significant protection for the collections.”

The J. Paul Getty Trust—which derives its wealth from the infamous 20th century oil baron—is the world’s richest art institution, with an estimated endowment of anywhere between \$7.7 to \$10.4 billion.

At the same time the Getty Museum remained unscathed, thousands of people have already lost their homes and been forced into packed evacuation shelters. Over 800 Pasadena residents are crowded inside the Pasadena Convention Center seeking temporary shelter from the fires. The squalid conditions of the building pose a substantial health risk to those inside as there is no ventilation system to protect from the nearby smoke of the spreading wildfires.

Pasadena resident Julie Esnard, 66, told the *Pasadena Star-News* she was forced to flee to the shelter after her apartment building lost electricity due to the Santa Ana winds. She characterized nearby Altadena as a “war zone” that had been “destroyed.”

“With the high winds, we were without electricity since early Tuesday morning,” she recalled, adding, “The building is gone and so is my mom’s house where my sister and her daughters lived.”



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