

Over 130 homes lost in California wildfire as winds drop

AFP – Firefighters grappling with a blaze that has destroyed at least 130 homes in California said Friday they had made progress in their fight as a turn in the weather offered a break.

Hurricane-strength winds this week fueled an explosion in the Mountain Fire near Camarillo, outside Los Angeles, which grew rapidly to over 20,000 acres (8,000 hectares).

Thousands of people in the path of the inferno were forced to flee, some with only minutes to gather possessions and pets as unpredictable flames leapt from home to home.

Robin Wallace told AFP the home she grew up in was destroyed minutes after everyone fled.

“We were expecting we’d be able to go back and get some things. But of course, that didn’t work out.

“It was completely gone by the afternoon. It went very quickly.”

Linda Fefferman said she knew she had to go when she smelled smoke.

“I’m trying to load the car with animals and important papers, my oxygen concentrator, and when it got too smoky for me, I knew I had to get out,” she told a local broadcaster.

A neighbor with a chainsaw helped remove a fallen tree that was blocking her path.

“I went down to the Goodwill parking lot, watched the smoke,

you know, probably our own house burning.

“Nothing is left. It’s gone,” she said. “It’s all gone.”

Fefferman said she thought 14 or 15 houses on her street had been destroyed by the flames.

Authorities said Thursday that initial inspections revealed at least 132 homes had been lost, with 88 more damaged.

The area is home to around 30,000 people, with approximately 10,000 having been told to evacuate.

– ‘Threat to critical infrastructure’ –

The blaze erupted Wednesday morning and spread rapidly, fanned by fierce seasonal Santa Ana winds from California’s desert interior.

Gusts up to 80 miles (130 kilometers) an hour pushed smoke and flames sideways, with terrifying footage showing fire engulfing brush, orchards and properties.

Those winds dropped Friday, with meteorologists saying they did not expect them to return for at least a few days.

That was welcome news for firefighters, some of whom had been on the frontlines for 36 hours straight.

The change in weather meant fire crews were able to make progress in their fight, said Nick Cleary of the Ventura County Fire Department, with 14 percent of the perimeter of the blaze contained.

“Today on the fire, we had a very successful day,” he told reporters, with a mild onshore breeze bringing some much-needed humidity.

More than 2,400 personnel, as well as engines, bulldozers and aircraft were involved in the fight.

“We need to keep using these resources with this advantageous weather that we’re having to get in there and make sure we’re mopping everything... so we’re not going to have any secondary starts,” Cleary said.

California Governor Gavin Newsom visited the area Thursday and declared a state of emergency, a move that will free up resources.

The White House said President Joe Biden called Newsom on Friday, along with local elected official Kelly Long, to discuss “support needed for the communities affected” and the approval of a Fire Management Assistance Grant by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Utility companies have shut off electricity to thousands of customers in the area – a common practice in California during high winds, with toppled power lines often causing wildfires.

Two relatively wet years have left California’s countryside flush with vegetation that is now dry and exceedingly flammable after a long, hot summer.

While fires, drought and strong winds are characteristics of the local environment, scientists say human-caused climate change is affecting weather patterns and increasing the likelihood of catastrophic events.

AFP