California governor spars with Musk over wildfire ‘lies’

AFP- California Governor Gavin Newsom has accused tech billionaire Elon Musk of spreading “lies” about the state’s response to deadly wildfires ravaging Los Angeles, escalating their online row over swirling misinformation.
President-elect Donald Trump and Musk – the Tesla and SpaceX owner poised to play a key role advising the incoming administration –- have stepped up criticism of the governor’s handling of the devastating blazes that have killed at least 24 people and displaced tens of thousands.

In a post on his social media platform X, Musk blamed the huge loss of homes in Los Angeles on “bad governance at a state and local level that resulted in a shortage of water.”

“(Musk) exposed by firefighters for his own lies,” Newsom posted late Sunday, alongside a video clip showing the tycoon asking a firefighter whether water availability was an issue.

The firefighter replied there was water in “several reservoirs,” and added that battling large-scale fires required supplementing the effort with water trucks.

In a separate spat over the weekend, Newsom accused Musk of “encouraging looting by lying,” after the billionaire amplified a post on X that falsely claimed the governor and his fellow Democrats had “decriminalized looting.”

“It’s illegal – as it always has been,” Newsom responded, amid concerns of a looting spree in areas where people were forced to flee the fires.

“Bad actors will be arrested and prosecuted,” he added.

– Viral, misleading videos –

Musk’s personal account on X, which has more than 212 million followers, has become increasingly influential and has often courted criticism for amplifying misinformation.

The platform – previously called Twitter, which Musk purchased in 2022 for $44 billion dollars – has seen an explosion of right-wing misinformation about the deadly wildfires, researchers say.

Even though months of dry weather and strong winds created optimal conditions for the wildfires, narratives on X have singled out diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies in the Los Angeles fire force as a culprit.

“DEI means people will DIE,” Musk posted over the weekend, while downplaying the impact of climate change.

One viral video debunked by the misinformation watchdog NewsGuard had falsely claimed fire department officials were desperately using women’s handbags to fight the flames because their resources had been diverted to “woke causes” and war assistance to Ukraine.

But the water-filled pouches seen in the video were actually “canvas bags,” carried by firefighters because they were easier to use for extinguishing small flames than having to haul out a hose, the entertainment news site TMZ cited local officials as saying.

Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones baselessly claimed on X that the fires were part of a “globalist plot to wage economic warfare and deindustrialize the United States.”

“True,” Musk wrote in response to Jones.

Wildfire misinformation was also swirling on other platforms including the Meta-owned Facebook.

Authorities recently warned of a false Facebook post urging people to travel to California to join a clean-up crew in areas affected by the wildfires.

“We would like to clarify that there is no such opportunity available,” the state’s fire protection department wrote on its website.

Meta triggered a global backlash last week after it announced it was scrapping third-party fact-checking in the United States and introducing a crowd-sourced moderation method similar to X.

Disinformation researchers have criticized Meta’s policy overhaul, which came less than two weeks before Trump takes office, warning that it risked opening the floodgates for false narratives.

Facebook currently pays to use fact checks from around 80 organizations globally on the platform, as well as on WhatsApp and Instagram. AFP currently works in 26 languages with Facebook’s fact-checking scheme.

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