

California catches a break from worst-ever year for wildfires with cooler weather, but the threat remains

By Chris Woodyard

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LOS ANGELES – After being ravaged by wildfires, California has won a temporary reprieve.

Temperatures plummeted, rain pelted much of the state, and snow dusted the mountains in the past week. Cooler weather, however, is little comfort to firefighters who know the state is still in the prime of what many still call fire season.

Firefighters, however, are determined not to call it that.

"We are trying to break away from the terminology," said Battalion Chief Issac Sanchez, spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire. "There really wasn't a flip of the switch."

In the past, Southern California's fire season ran from about May or June to November, he said. Now, it seems as if wildfires can break out just about any time of the year. But the worst blazes are still reserved for July and August, when the state is baking, then later in the fall when the flames are pushed by hot, dry and capricious winds – Santa Anas in the south and the Diablos in the north.

This is the worst year ever for wildfires. Five of the six of the largest wildfires in California history started in August and September. Collectively they burned more than 2,500 square miles, an area about the size of Delaware. The fires killed 22 people.

While fire departments may not refer to fire season per se in their public declarations, their leases of firefighting aircraft and other contract services still focus on the most dangerous months of the year.

For more than two decades, for example, Los Angeles County has leased a pair of Bombardier CL-415 SuperScooper aircraft for 90 days at a time from Quebec, Canada, to augment its own fleet of water-dropping helicopters. The amphibious planes skim the surface of lakes or the ocean to fill tanks with more than 1,600 gallons of water that can be dropped on the flames. Their arrival this year was announced in early September.

Using the term "fire season" also leads to fears that the public will let up its guard by becoming careless about campfires, fireworks, cigarette butts or other sources of flame that could spark a major conflagration.

Not referring to fire season "was more of a messaging thing. It was easy for the public to assume since we're not in fire season, we're not in fire danger," Sanchez said.

Still, experts say there is no getting around how the effects of climate change and generally warmer temperatures are lengthening the most intense periods of the year for fires.

"Southern California has had a year-long fire season for years," said Scott Stephens, professor of fire science at the University of California-Berkeley. Northern California has been devastated by seasonal fires that can hit as late as this month.

The most devastating fires still strike during in the second half of any year. The state's 20 largest wildfires all occurred from June through December; August is the worst month.

The most deadly blaze in state history, the Camp Fire, killed 85 and destroyed 18,804 homes and other structures in November 2018, according to Cal Fire.

The worst may not be over this year.

To know whether Southern California will add to its wildfires, look to the Santa Anas, said David Houck, senior meteorologist for AccuWeather.com. Those winds already put a scare in many Orange County residents when two wind-driven blazes broke out last month, one threatening neighborhoods in Irvine and the other residents in Yorba Linda.

Another Santa Ana wind is expected in Southern California this weekend, but it should be mild enough that not a lot is expected from it especially after the drenching the region just received, according to Houck.

As for future ones, he said, "the best thing I can say is we have to keep focusing on any future Santa Ana events."