

Fierce California Winds Fan Fires, Topple Trees and Trucks

By Associated Press

The Business Journal, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021

(AP) — Months-old embers from a deadly California fire were blown back to life Tuesday by powerful winds that raked the state and prompted safety blackouts to tens of thousands of people.

Firefighters chased wind-driven blazes up and down the state, trees and trucks were toppled, Yosemite National Park was forced to close and two coronavirus vaccination centers were shut down.

South of San Francisco, the state's firefighting agency said it responded to 13 vegetation fires in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties in 12 hours, and isolated evacuations were ordered for a total of 120 homes near two of them.

The fires were small, with the largest no more than a few dozen acres, and by nightfall were "creeping" rather than racing, according to state fire website descriptions. Two were within the area burned by last year's CZU Lightning Complex inferno.

"Fires within the CZU Lightning Complex burn area were regenerated by high winds," the local unit of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection tweeted.

The complex started Aug. 16, 2020, during a barrage of lightning strikes.

Separate fires merged, torching 1,500 buildings across 135 square miles (350 square kilometers) in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties. One person died.

The Santa Cruz Mountains have a thick layer of "duff," dead vegetation under heavy timber in which deep smoldering embers can be revived by the wind, said Cecile Juliette, a Cal Fire spokeswoman.

Cal Fire received nonstop reports of toppled trees and branches during the windstorm, Juliette said.

Small fires blazed throughout the state, though most were quickly stopped from spreading and posed no serious threat to homes. The largest, near Bakersfield in the San Joaquin Valley, burned about 1 square mile (2.77 square kilometers) but was mostly surrounded.

In both the north and south, residents were blacked out by utilities to prevent downed or damaged power lines from sparking blazes.

Southern California Edison shut off power to more than 78,000 homes and businesses in seven counties and was considering blacking out well over a quarter-million more. Pacific Gas & Electric cut power to more than 5,000 customers.

That was in addition to nearly 300,000 customers in the northern and central parts of the state that had lost power because of the weather. About 70,000 remained without power by Tuesday evening.

Most of California is experiencing drought conditions and the remainder is considered abnormally dry. Winter snowfall and rain have largely been woeful.

Gusts began Monday night and raged into Tuesday. They howled at speeds up to 95 mph (152.8 kph) in the Mayacamas Mountains to the north of San Francisco Bay, and winds raised clouds of ash and dust from wildfire burn scars across Monterey County, the regional National Weather Service office said.

High wind warnings were posted in the Sierra Nevada and adjacent foothills.

"People should avoid being outside in forested areas and around trees and branches," the Hanford weather office wrote. "If possible, remain in the lower levels of your home during the windstorm, and avoid windows. Use caution if you must drive."

Yosemite National Park closed for the day, citing the winds and downed trees that smashed trucks and at least one building. The park said it could remain closed until Friday morning.

In rural Bass Lake, south of the park, a 100-foot (30-meter) pine tree smashed through Don Mandy's house as he was posting a Facebook message about the roaring winds keeping him awake.

"It sounded like an earthquake," he told KFSN-TV. Then a second tree toppled and a branch poked another hole through his roof. He and his wife fled for cover in another area of the house and weren't harmed.

In Southern California, the region's notorious Santa Ana winds were ramping up, making travel hazardous for big rigs. Some were blown over.

One gust hit 86 mph (138.4 kph) in northern Los Angeles County, the National Weather Service said.

The winds began easing Tuesday afternoon in the Bay Area and northward, which would see "dry and tranquil midweek weather," according to a National Weather Service forecast. But strong northeast winds were expected to continue in Southern California through Wednesday.

The wind forced closure of a mass COVID-19 vaccination site at Hansen Dam in the San Fernando Valley. Another site at a Disneyland parking lot was closed in advance of the gusts.

The city of Los Angeles instituted its program of restricting parking in hilly neighborhoods where narrow, winding streets can be difficult for fire engines to maneuver.

Downtown Los Angeles has had only 1.95 inches (4.95 centimeters) of rain since the Oct. 1 start of the "water year," nearly 4 inches (10.16 centimeters) below normal.

California winds easing after sparking fires, power outages

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A windstorm that fanned brushfires, toppled trees and left thousands of Californians without power focused its remaining energy Wednesday on the southern end of the state, where forecasters warned of the additional threat of heavy rain and flash flooding.

Strong winds that began Tuesday night reached 50 mph in many areas. Hurricane-force gusts of around 85 mph hit a mountain area in San Diego County and came with about a half-inch of rain in some locations.

The winds were tapering off by sunset in many areas although high-wind warnings remained in place until 10 p.m. in San Bernardino and Riverside counties and inland areas of Orange County.

In addition, a low-pressure system moving across northern Baja California was expected to draw subtropical moisture into the region during the night, the National Weather Service said.

Flash-flood watches were posted for the eastern and southern mountains and deserts and snow was expected at elevations of 5,500 feet (1,676 meters) and higher.

Utilities, meanwhile, were dealing with power outages resulting from a combination of wind damage and public safety power shutoffs intended to prevent sparks from downed or damaged equipment from starting fires.

Southern California Edison's website showed around 15,000 of its 5 million customers remained intentionally blacked out early Wednesday.

Pacific Gas & Electric intentionally shut power to around 5,000 customers in the northern and central areas of the state before winds there eased Tuesday. The utility was busy restoring power to around 286,000 customers who lost power due to severe weather and the majority already had their electricity restored.

Power lines must be inspected for signs of damage and repaired before they can be reenergized. PG&E said preliminary reports showed 125 power poles and 125 transformers had been damaged.

The powerful winds howled into Northern California late Monday and moved southward Tuesday under the influence of low-pressure systems.

Trees fell, branches flew and big rigs toppled over on highways. The danger and damage from falling trees prompted Yosemite National Park to close until Friday morning.

Wildfires occurred statewide, including two from gusts fanning long-smoldering embers from one of last summer's massive wildfires in counties south of the San Francisco Bay region. Firefighters on alert due to the predicted conditions kept the fires small.

The weather has been cooling since last week, when some areas had unseasonable highs in the 90s. Two incoming low-pressure systems were expected to bring even cooler temperatures beginning Thursday night through Saturday and again early next week. Areas of Southern California could see highs 20 to 40 degrees below last week's highs along with chances of rain ranging from a quarter-inch heading into the weekend to a half-inch by Monday and even an inch in some mountains, according to the National Weather Service.