

# Why are ferocious wildfires plaguing southern California?

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A man watches flames consume a residence as a wildfire rages in Ventura, California, December 5, 2017. Ferocious winds in Southern California have whipped up explosive wildfires, burning a psychiatric hospital and scores of other structures. AP Photo/ Noah Berger

Many exhausted firefighters are currently battling fires that have menaced Los Angeles. Normally, they wouldn't expect to be dealing with such ferocious fires with Christmas just a couple weeks away.

A combination of short and longer-term events have sparked a ring of fires around Los Angeles. These fires started with the 96,000-acre Thomas fire that looms over the city of Ventura.

More than 200,000 people in the potential path of fire have been told to evacuate. More than 300 homes and other buildings are already destroyed, hundreds of schools shut down and the 101 freeway closed off. The singer Lionel Richie had to cancel a concert to help family members flee the flames. Smoke has extended more than 1,000 miles into the Pacific Ocean.

So why are such unusually strong fires plaguing southern California?

## **Unhelpful Conditions**

This year was already difficult for California, even before the current fires. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, also known as Cal Fire, called it a "very difficult and trying" year. There were fires that tore through Napa Valley in October, killing 22 people and damaging more than 5,600 buildings.

Southern California had unusually warm weather this year, with the warmest weather on record from April until September. This, combined with extremely limited rainfall in the Los Angeles area, created perfect conditions for wildfires. The dry Santa Ana winds, reaching 70 mph in places, have helped spread the flames at an extraordinary rate. The Thomas fire grew at around an acre per second as it developed and is still nowhere near contained.

## **Plenty Of Fuel**

The seeds of the current fires were planted nearly a year ago. Warm weather flowed in from Hawaii and flooded much of California in weeks of rain, breaking the state's worst drought on record.

The rains mainly came in the north of the state, but the south also had a very wet winter, which spurred the growth of many shrubs and trees. Then, a very warm summer and autumn came, with the hottest November ever recorded by three different weather stations. The plants that had grown dried up and became good fuel for a wildfire.

Natural forces usually do not cause wildfires to start. The vast majority of fires are started by humans, either on purpose or accidentally. However, once they start, natural forces like wind, plants and trees can fuel them.

## **Climate Change Influence?**

There is some discussion among scientists about the exact role of climate change in the 2017 California wildfires, but it's clear that this year has been a big one for fire nationally. More than 9.2 million acres have burned so far in 2017, which is more land than the entire state of Maryland. It is also about 3 million more acres than have burned every year on average for the last decade. About half a million acres in California have gone up in flames.

Wildfires have already caused around \$10 billion in damages around the country this year. It's likely that the threat to property, as well as life, will grow in the future due to climate change. The fire season has lengthened and caused increasing amounts of land to be chewed up in recent

decades. A study published last year found that the total area burned in the western United States over the past 33 years was double the size it would have been without any human-caused global warming.

The warming temperatures dry out plants that then become more flammable. And once large areas burn, they release carbon that feeds even further global warming. With huge mega-droughts expected in the future in California, huge fires could well accompany the arrival of Santa Claus and the winter holidays on a regular basis in the decades ahead.