

California firefighters make gains ahead of strong winds

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VENTURA (REUTERS) - Firefighters in Southern California made progress on Saturday (Dec 9) in their multifront battle against a slew of wildfires that have killed at least one person, destroyed hundreds of buildings and forced more than 200,000 people from their homes this week.

As the dry Santa Ana winds that have fuelled the blazes abated slightly, officials lifted evacuation orders for parts of Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, and crews started getting the upper hand in containing some of the area's major fires.

But with the National Weather Service expecting a pickup in top wind velocity to 89kmh on Sunday from 64kmh, the 8,700 firefighters battling six fast-moving blazes were under pressure to work fast.

"We're far from being out of the woods on any of them," Ken Pimlott, director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire), told a news briefing in Ventura.

Since the fires began erupting on Monday, nearly 800 buildings have been destroyed, most of them in Ventura County where the Thomas Fire, the largest of the blazes, has charred 59,893ha, an area about the size of Chicago, officials said.

California Governor Jerry Brown told reporters that climate change had helped make intense fires such as these the state's "new normal." They "could happen every year or every few years," he said.

"They're happening all the time – this one is just more intense. It's been a terrible tragedy for so many people."

The fires, which have threatened Californians from Santa Barbara County down the Pacific Coast to Mexico, have claimed at least one human casualty.

Late on Friday, Ventura County Medical Examiner Christopher Young said his office had linked the death of Virginia Pesola, 70, in a Wednesday car accident along an evacuation route from the Thomas Fire.

"The cause of death is blunt force injuries with terminal smoke inhalation and thermal injuries," Young said in a statement.

The spreading fires prompted Governor Brown to issue emergency proclamations earlier this week for Santa Barbara, San Diego, Los Angeles and Ventura counties. President Donald Trump issued a federal proclamation that enables agencies to coordinate relief efforts.



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The fires have put property worth billions of dollars at risk in California, where wildfires in the northern part of the state in October resulted in insured losses of more than US\$9 billion (S\$12 billion). Those fires, concentrated in the state's wine country, killed 43 people.

At their peak, this week's fires drove about 212,000 Californians from their homes. But the lifting of several evacuation orders reduced the number of people displaced from their homes to 87,000 on Saturday.

In Ventura early on Saturday, thick, grey air that made it hard to see gave way to blue skies as strong winds blew the smoke out to sea. Bits of debris flying around did not deter surfers from the beach next to the Ventura Pier.

Throughout the area, officials reported gains in their battle to contain the fires. The Thomas Fire was 15 per cent contained and the Skirball Fire in Los Angeles was 50 per cent contained, while the Creek and Rye Fires in Los Angeles County were 80 per cent and 65 per cent contained, respectively, officials said.

North of San Diego, the Lilac Fire destroyed 105 structures after swelling from 4ha to 1,659ha in a few hours on Thursday. Officials said they had contained 20 per cent of it by Saturday.

Fallbrook, known for its avocado orchards, burned, and homes were destroyed in its Rancho Monserate Country Club retirement community. Blazes approached the US Marine Corps' Camp Pendleton base.

A 500-stall stable for thoroughbred race horses at San Luis Rey Downs training site burned late on Thursday, the Los Angeles Times reported.

An estimated 25 to 30 horses died, in addition to 29 horses killed in Los Angeles earlier in the week. A trainer suffered second- and third-degree burns over half her body trying to rescue horses, the newspaper said.

She was airlifted to a San Diego hospital and placed in a medically induced coma.

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