

With Wildfires Still Burning, Southern California Remains Dry

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Forecasters say southern California remains at risk of rapidly spreading wildfires due to gusty winds and extremely low humidity, but that the winds should be nowhere near as strong as they were last week when multiple fires exploded across the region.

The National Weather Service says peak gusts could reach about 60 kilometers per hour through Thursday. That is half as strong as the area around Los Angeles saw last week.

The Santa Ana winds have helped build one of the largest and most destructive fires in California's history in an area about 160 kilometers northwest of Los Angeles.

The so-called Thomas Fire has burned more than 930 square kilometers and destroyed 800 buildings in Santa Barbara County since it started a week ago. Authorities say the blaze was 20 percent contained as of late Monday.

Cal Fire official Tim Chavez said at a briefing late Monday the last time the same area burned in a wildfire was 1964, so the fuel there is more than 50 years old.

More than 6,300 personnel are involved in fighting the Thomas Fire, and more have been able to focus their efforts there after crews made major progress in bringing several much smaller fires under control in recent days.

The fires have forced more than 200,000 people to evacuate their homes. Authorities have been handing out face masks to help protect people from smoke inhalation, and a number of schools have been closed.

President Donald Trump responded to the fires Friday by issuing a federal declaration of a state of emergency for California, paving the way for federal agencies to help coordinate relief efforts.

Fires are not uncommon in southern California this time of year as the region experiences a mix of strong winds and dry vegetation.

In October, wildfires that broke out in northern California killed 44 people and destroyed 8,900 homes and other buildings.

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