Dry autumn and strong winds helped fuel massive California fires

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A lone horse stands amid a burned landscape from the Woolsey Fire along Mulholland Highway in the Malibu hills of California, November 12, 2018. Photo by: Al Seib/Los Angeles Times/TNS

Paradise, California, is a wet place compared to most of California.

It averages about 55 inches of rain a year. The rainfall is due to its location in the forested foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains in Northern California. It gets a lot of rain coming off the Pacific Ocean.

This year has been different, though. When the Camp Fire sparked November 8, Paradise was dry. The area usually gets about 15 storms during the summer and early fall, adding up to 5 inches of rain. This year, it got just one-seventh of one inch.

The plants and trees around Paradise were so dry it was dangerous. The result was the worst fire in California's history. It has left 10,300 buildings destroyed, at least 63 dead and dozens still missing.

Across California, the lack of autumn rain is creating serious problems. Ventura County is in Southern California. There the Woolsey Fire destroyed hundreds of homes in early November. The county also got almost no rain through the summer and fall. Early fall storms were supposed to have ended the Northern California fire season by now. That would have allowed more firefighters to head to Southern California to battle fires spread by the winds there.

The Camp Fire is still raging in Northern California, though. Officials said there were fewer firefighters on hand to battle the Woolsey blaze that swept through Southern California.

Firefighters Have To Travel Longer Distances

Daryl Osby is the Los Angeles County fire chief. He said that a lot of the help they usually get was not there this time around. "Our help came from farther away," including as far away as Texas, he said.

Scientists say that in a future affected by climate change, California should expect drier autumns and springs. More of the rain and snow will be concentrated in the winter months.

That is bad news for firefighters. They rely on early rains to lower the danger from extreme winds that start in the fall. Those winds spread many of California's worst blazes.

Nina Oakley is an expert on the regional climate. She works for the Western Regional Climate Center. She said that the fire season will likely continue into the fall and even early winter more often from now on.

In the last six years, California's southern coastal region has been drier than average during the fall. The lack of rain brought record dryness for plants and trees. That makes fires much more dangerous. Very dry plants and trees fuel fires further.

Paradise Had Fast-Spreading Fire

Paradise's dry plants and trees caused the fire to spread very fast. That's not how it's been in the past. Paradise has often gotten 20 inches of rain in a single month during the rainy season.

Southern California's rainy season got a very late start last year too. It led to very dry conditions. Then, the Thomas Fire last December devastated Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. The fire became the second-largest California wildfire in the modern record. It burned up 282,000 acres. That's almost as big as the city of Los Angeles.

Daniel Swain studies the climate. He works at the University of California, Los Angeles. Swain said that if Northern California had received the normal amount of autumn rainfall this year, things would be different. The fire would not have been so hard to contain. The sad events in Paradise would almost certainly not have happened, he said.

It's been hot all over the state recently. California experienced its hottest month on record this past July.

Having late wildfires also creates problems for the rainy season to come. Weeks after the Thomas Fire hit, rains caused deadly mudslides. The mudslides killed more than 20 people.

Oakley said things get difficult when wildfires continue right up until the first rainfall. There's very little time for teams to clean up the area. They don't have time to prevent dangerous mudslides

and other problems, she said.

Quiz

1 Which selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-6] shows how the low rainfall affected Paradise?

(A) Paradise, California, is a wet place compared to most of California. It averages about 55 inches of rain a year.

(B) The rainfall is due to its location in the forested foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains in Northern California. It gets a lot of rain coming off the Pacific Ocean.

(C) This year, it got just one-seventh of one inch.The plants and trees around Paradise were so dry it was dangerous. The result was the worst fire in California's history.

(D) The county also got almost no rain through the summer and fall. Early fall storms were supposed to have ended the Northern California fire season by now.

2 Read the section “Paradise Had Fast-Spreading Fire.”

Which sentence from the section supports the conclusion that the fires can make other disasters possible?

(A) Then, the Thomas Fire last December devastated Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

(B) The fire would not have been so hard to contain.

(C) California experienced its hottest month on record this past July.

(D) Weeks after the Thomas Fire hit, rains caused deadly mudslides.

3 What is the relationship between extreme winds and fires?

(A) Extreme winds spread fires.

(B) Extreme winds help dump rain onto fires.

(C) Extreme winds make fires less dangerous.

(D) Extreme winds help prevent fires.

4 What caused the Woolsey Fire in Southern California?

(A) a spring storm

(B) a lack of winter rain

(C) a summer storm

(D) a lack of autumn rain