

News Coverage of Wind and Fire Response
January 13, 2025

Broadcast Coverage of Wind and Fire Response

NBC News Now (1/10/2025) - *Interview with LAFD's Captain Silverman. LADWP positive mention

- <https://vimeo.com/1046473194/7dc4e33a61>

Cal Fire speaking at LA County FD's Virtual Town Hall (1/9/2025)

- <https://vimeo.com/1046478165/0145006075>

Los Angeles fires

Eaton fire evacuations

Palisades fire evacuations

Wildfire resource guide

H

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

Why hydrants ran dry as firefighters battled California's deadly fires



L.A. County firefighter Scott Takeguma works to douse the flames on the remnants of a home in Altadena on Wednesday. [More photos.](#) (Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times)

By Ian James, Matt Hamilton and Ruben Vives

Published Jan. 9, 2025 | Updated Jan. 10, 2025 5:09 PM PT

As crews have fought the fast-spreading fires across the Los Angeles area, they have repeatedly been hampered by low water pressure and fire hydrants that have gone dry. These problems have exposed what experts say are vulnerabilities in city water supply systems not built for wildfires on this scale.

The water system that supplies neighborhoods simply doesn't have the capacity to deliver such large volumes of water over several hours, said Martin Adams, former general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

"The system has never been designed to fight a wildfire that then envelops a community," Adams said in an interview with The Times.



Increasing winds bring potential for 'explosive fire growth' across L.A. County this week

The limitations of local water systems complicated firefighting efforts in Pacific Palisades, where scores of fire hydrants were left with little or no water, and in Altadena and Pasadena, which are served by different utilities and where firefighters say they have grappled with low water pressure.

The local water supply system in the Palisades area is designed to flow with enough gallons a minute to fight a house fire or a blaze in apartments or commercial buildings, Adams said. "Then you have a massive fire over the whole community and you have 10 times as many fire units, all pulling water out of the system at once."

When a wildfire erupts, L.A. fire crews often turn to using aircraft to drop water and fire retardant.

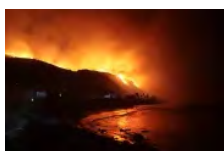
But while the flames were spreading rapidly on Tuesday and Wednesday, officials temporarily grounded water-dropping helicopters because of the extraordinarily

strong Santa Ana winds, making crews more dependent on the limited water systems on the ground.

To help, city officials sent tanker trucks to supply water for crews in areas where supplies were limited.

The firefighting efforts put the area's water system under tremendous strain and "pushed the system to the extreme," with four times the usual water demand for 15 hours, said Janisse Quiñones, DWP's chief executive and chief engineer. She said the hydrants rely on three large water tanks with about 1 million gallons each. Hydrants functioned at lower elevations, but in hillier areas like the Palisades Highlands — where the storage tanks hold water that flows by gravity to communities below — they ran dry.

The DWP and city leaders have faced criticism from residents as well as Rick Caruso, the developer and former mayoral candidate, who [blamed "mismanagement" and old infrastructure](#).



CALIFORNIA

Fire hydrants ran dry as Pacific Palisades burned. L.A. city officials blame 'tremendous demand'

Jan. 8, 2025

Water researchers said, however, that the infrastructure limitations are a common feature of many urban water systems.

"Local water systems are usually designed to fight local, small-scale fires over a limited time period," said Kathryn Sorensen, director of research at Arizona State University's Kyl Center for Water Policy. "They are not generally designed to fight large, long-lasting wildfires."

The limitations raise several questions: As fires grow larger and more intense in the West, should storage tanks and other local water infrastructure be expanded to contend with them? Where? And at what cost?

Sorenson said that utilities need to consider how much water-storage capacity to develop in neighborhoods on the urban fringes.

“Given the known risk of wildfire in these hillsides, it is fair to question whether more water storage should have been added in previous years and months,” she said.



CALIFORNIA

State to probe why Pacific Palisades reservoir was offline, empty when firestorm exploded

Jan. 10, 2025

The existing water system in Los Angeles has “severe limits,” said Gregory Pierce, director of the UCLA Water Resources Group. “At least the way we’ve always built systems and wanted to pay for systems, you can’t really expect systems, even like DWP’s, to be prepared for this.”

When the fire broke out in Pacific Palisades, a nearby DWP reservoir was also [out of commission and empty for repairs](#), and officials said they are analyzing how this might have affected water supplies in the area.

Gov. Gavin Newsom on Friday [ordered an investigation](#) into the causes behind the water supply problems that hindered firefighting efforts. He said in a letter to DWP and L.A. County officials that the reports of problems are “deeply troubling.”

“We need answers to ensure this does not happen again,” Newsom said.

The scale of the fires has [surpassed previous L.A. fire disasters](#). The Palisades fire swelled rapidly and has [destroyed more than 5,000 homes and other buildings](#), and the Eaton fire in Altadena and Pasadena has damaged or destroyed an additional 4,000 to 5,000 homes and other buildings.

The causes that sparked these and other fires are under investigation.

The fires erupted following a stark shift from wet weather to extremely dry weather, a bout of [climate “whiplash”](#) that scientists say increased wildfire risks. Research has shown that these abrupt wet-to-dry swings are growing more frequent and intense because of human-caused climate change. Scientists have found that global warming is contributing significantly to larger and more intense wildfires in the western U.S. in recent years.

Because city fire hydrants are not designed for major, wind-driven fires, firefighters prepare for situations with contingency plans in which they need to provide their own water using tanker trucks, said Arthur Lester, a spokesperson for the L.A. County Fire Department.



CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

Intensifying climate ‘whiplash’ set the stage for devastating California fires

Jan. 9, 2025

DWP, which has sent tanker trucks to help firefighters, said the intensity of the fires disrupted those plans. The utility’s crews had limited access to the three storage tanks in the Palisades, and in one case DWP crews attempting to reroute water to refill a tank had to be evacuated, officials said.

DWP has urged all customers, especially those on the Westside, to conserve water to help in prioritizing supplies for firefighting.

In Altadena, firefighters encountered similar problems with low water pressure as they tried to slow the spread of the [Eaton fire](#). Pasadena Fire Chief Chad Augustin said having dozens of fire engines battling multiple fires resulted in overuse of the water system.

“On top of that, we had a loss of power temporarily,” which affected the system, he told reporters Wednesday.

Even if the crews had had more water, however, “with those wind gusts, we were not stopping that fire last night,” Augustin said. “Those erratic wind gusts were throwing embers for multiple miles ahead of the fire, and that’s really what caused the rapid spread of the fire.”

He said such water constraints are to be expected when faced with such a major wildfire in an urban area. And Thursday, Augustin said the period of low water pressure in hydrants had passed and firefighters were no longer experiencing any problems.

“It’s very common in a city when you have that big of a fire with that many resources, we’re going to tax our water supply and water system,” Augustin said. “And if you have a loss of power which may impact the pressure, it’s going to make it even worse.”

Firefighters began communicating over the radio about fire hydrant problems Tuesday night, just hours after the Eaton fire erupted.

“I have some water issues pretty much east and west, and the entire north end of the fire,” one firefighter said over the radio.

“We’re getting water to work on it,” a dispatcher responded.

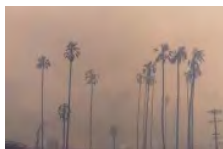
The problems that firefighters reported in parts of Altadena occurred in [neighborhoods served by two small suppliers](#), Rubio Cañon Land and Water Assn.

and Lincoln Avenue Water. Representatives of those suppliers couldn't be reached for comment.

The Eaton fire broke out in an adjacent area supplied by Kinneloa Irrigation District, and the flames caused minor damage to a generator, which has since been fixed, said Tom Majich, the district's general manager.

Despite that damage, the district supplied water for firefighters using backup generators and borrowing water from Pasadena Water and Power, Majich said.

"All of our pumps were operational," he said. "We were pumping water throughout the entire event."



SCIENCE & MEDICINE

How to protect yourself from the smoke caused by L.A. wildfires

Jan. 8, 2025

He said the district's success in keeping water flowing was due partly to lessons learned from the Kinneloa fire in 1993, when a lack of generators and power outages kept water from fire crews. This time, he said, his district had its system ready for the emergency. But he added that problems occurred in other areas due to the limitations of infrastructure.

"To fight a wildfire, you have to have Lake Havasu behind you," he said. "You could fill a Rose Bowl with water and it wouldn't be enough water."

"There's not a system that can do it," he said.

Topography is also a factor in communities where water is pumped from the valley floor up to hilltop storage tanks.

Sorensen said any water utility that serves an area with large differences in elevation will have similar limitations. Engineers plan water systems with pressure zones in increments of 100 feet of elevation. A place like Pacific Palisades, for example, rises from sea level to over 1,500 feet.

In Phoenix, for comparison, the city supplies water in a vast territory with many hills and mountains, and has nearly 80 pressure zones, Sorensen said.

“Phoenix’s largest pressure zone is massive and the storage capacity in it is such that Phoenix could fight multiple fires for a very long period of time without running out of pressure for fire hydrants,” she said. “Other pressure zones are very small and serve only a few customers, sometimes less than a dozen. Storage in these pressure zones will be much smaller and there likely wouldn’t be enough stored water to fight more than one small house fire.”

Although decisions about infrastructure investments are often driven by population, wildfire risks in hillside zones are another factor for utilities to consider in building water-storing infrastructure, Sorensen said. In the L.A. area, she said, it would have been very expensive to develop additional storage “adequate to mitigate or even fight the wildfires in these higher-elevation pressure zones, but right now I’d imagine most people in L.A. would say it would’ve been worth the cost.”

**BUSINESS****How the devastating Los Angeles fires could deepen California’s home insurance crisis**Jan. 9, 2025

Pierce said there could be ways of investing in the local infrastructure to expand water capacity for firefighting in Pacific Palisades if residents in the area were willing to pay the high cost of such investments.

“It’s going to come at great cost,” he said. And he added that such additional water storage might not have stopped a fire of this size and intensity anyway.

Pierce pointed out that these types of water problems have happened during previous fires in Malibu and other areas, where firefighters encountered dry hydrants and turned to using swimming pools or scooping water from the ocean.

“Whether there’s a near-term future where we could and should do more, and a long-term future where you could think about doing a lot more, at incredibly high cost, those things are on the table,” Pierce said.

Adams, DWP’s former general manager, said the gap is growing between what the L.A. water system was built for and the dangers of massive, fast-moving fires.

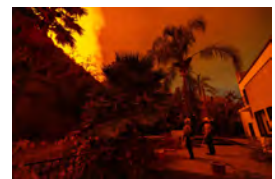
“The urban interface is changing and we’ve designed for classic fires, not a wildfire blowing through a community,” Adams said. “We need to think about fire protection and what firefighters really need if this is going to be the way of the future.”

Times staff writer Grace Toohey contributed to this report.

More to Read

Firefighters gain ground on deadly L.A. wildfires, but more wind is on the way

Jan. 11, 2025



Newsom orders investigation into dry fire hydrants that hampered firefighting in L.A.

Jan. 10, 2025



NEXT ARTICLE

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

<https://www.wsj.com/us-news/los-angeles-wildfires-social-media-rumors-44d224b4>

Fighting Fires—and the Rumor Mill—as L.A. Burns

‘The worst I’ve ever seen.’ Skyrocketing misinformation is forcing public officials to adopt a new playbook when tragedies hit their communities

By [Scott Calvert](#) [Follow](#) and [Joshua Chaffin](#) [Follow](#)

Jan. 11, 2025 9:00 pm ET

Los Angeles Fire Department Capt. Erik Scott has one of the most intense jobs in the nation right now: trying to distribute accurate public information during a historically destructive urban fire in America.

On Thursday, a new unexpected foe cropped up: Alex Jones, among the world’s most notorious conspiracy theorists, was posting on X that L.A. firefighters were battling the blazes using ladies’ handbags as buckets because officials had donated equipment to Ukraine. The post has been viewed 29 million times.

Scott, the LAFD public-information officer, quickly explained publicly that the “handbags,” were actually canvas bags routinely carried by firefighters to douse small fires, because that is easier and faster than hauling out and connecting hoses.

“We’re trying to battle the most devastating natural disaster in Los Angeles history,” Scott said by phone on Saturday while driving to base camp on the fifth day of the wildfire ordeal. “It takes people and time to track down or debunk social media rumors—it takes us away from doing more important things.”

Fast-proliferating online falsehoods are forcing public officials nationwide to adopt a new job when crisis strikes their communities. Their duties now include knocking down the inevitable wave of lies, half-truths and conspiracy theories—some wild, some believable—that have of late become part of every major public emergency, from Hurricane Helene to the recent Tesla explosion in Las Vegas.

This more assertive approach to debunking rumors is part of a playbook officials around the U.S. are increasingly turning to during natural disasters, high-profile crimes and contentious debates about issues like immigration.

At the same time, social-media platforms are complicating their task by loosening the reins on what people can post.

By coincidence, the Los Angeles fires started the same day Meta Platforms said it was ending fact-checking and removing speech restrictions across Facebook and Instagram, with the stated aim of restoring free expression. Since his 2022 acquisition of Twitter, Elon Musk has slashed content-policy jobs and eased content limits on the platform he renamed X. Changes under Musk have enabled users to get paid for X posts if they generate enough engagement—and [Musk himself has repeatedly amplified](#) inflammatory or conspiratorial content about hot-button issues.



In North Carolina, Hurricane Helene generated widespread damage and rumors—forcing first responders to do double duty. PHOTO: ANGELA OWENS/WSJ

‘Lies will take over’

The rise of AI-generated content is adding another layer of complexity, such as when fabricated pictures emerged showing flames around the iconic Hollywood sign, which in reality has escaped damage. One giveaway that the images were fake: some put an extra letter on the hilltop, making it “Hollywoodd” or “Hollylywood.”

Numerous falsehoods about Hurricane Helene surfaced online last September amid rising floodwaters in western North Carolina and in the aftermath. “Bar none, this was probably the worst I’ve ever seen as far as misinformation and disinformation goes,” said Brian Haines, who helped manage the state’s joint information center.

In response, the North Carolina Department of Public Safety created a still-live “Ground Truth” webpage, and “Hurricane Helene FAQs” that plainly lists and rebuffs the many assertions ricocheting around social media. Recovery efforts weren’t in fact “a land grab by the State of North Carolina” in disguise, nor were there “morgue trailers hidden with bodies still inside them.” It also wasn’t true, the state assured the public, that impacts from Helene were “due to weather manipulation.”

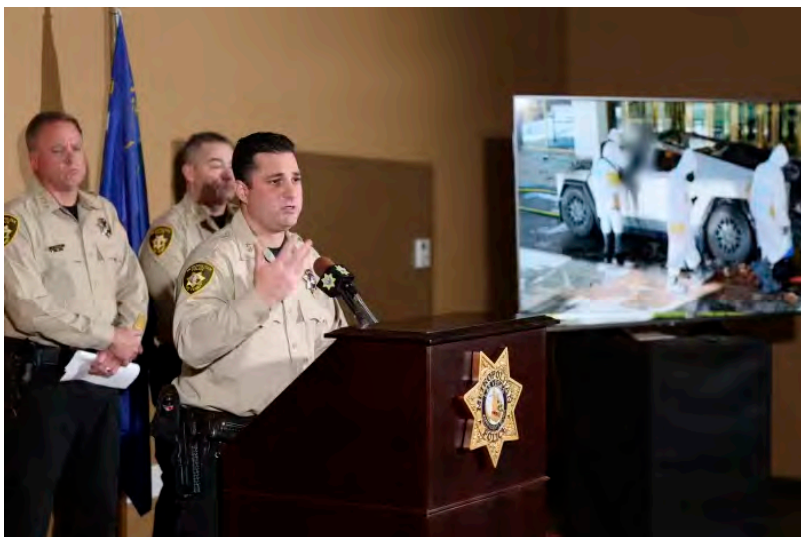
Officials decided this needed saying: “No technology exists that can create, destroy, modify, strengthen or steer hurricanes in any way, shape or form,” says the government website:

“The best we can do is provide [the public] with the most accurate information we have. Does everybody trust the government? No. We recognize this,” Haines said. “If you don’t steer the narrative to the truth, the lies will take over.”

On New Year’s Day, a pair of unnerving events offered contrasting case studies in how to respond to the public thirst for information in an age of mistrust and rampant conspiracy theories.

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department won praise for its handling of the case of troubled soldier Matthew Livelsberger, named as the man who blew up a rented Tesla Cybertruck outside the Trump International Hotel, killing himself and injuring several bystanders.

The show put on by Sheriff Kevin McMahon was, according to fellow public safety officials, a kind of master class in how they should speak to the public in times of crisis. McMahon and his team pumped out easily-digestible updates on social media about the progress of the investigation.



Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department Assistant Sheriff Dori Koren shows a photo of the investigation into a Tesla Cybertruck that exploded at the Trump International Hotel. PHOTO: K.M. CANNON/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL/AP

The high point was a roughly 30-minute televised briefing, in which the gravelly-voiced McMahonill appeared human and forthright as he addressed the sundry rumors and fragments of information that were circulating online. What other officials might have dismissed as speculation, the sheriff was willing to entertain, as if he were speaking directly to the recesses of the social media echo chamber.

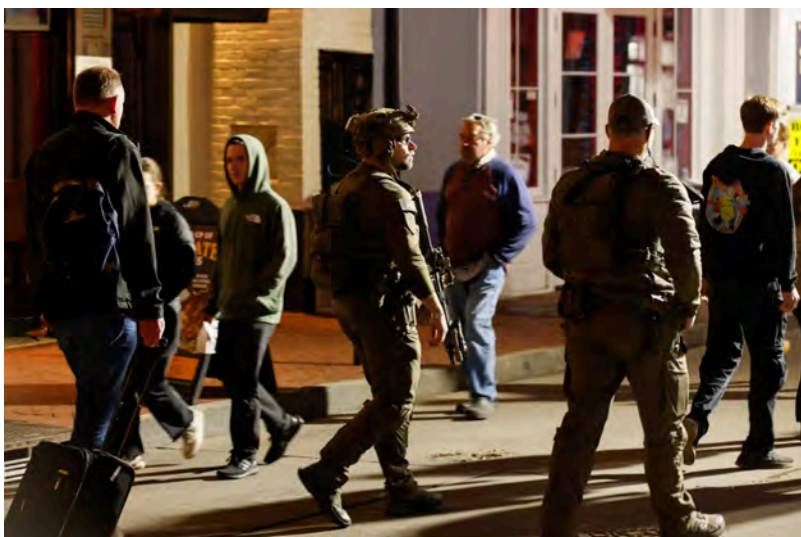
“I want you to know I’m very well aware of a podcast that’s going around today,” McMahonill said. “I just want you to understand that since we have been conducting these press conferences I’ve only been giving you information that we’ve verified and deemed to be factually accurate.”

Among the wild theories circulating there was whether the body in the car was actually Livelsberger (on social media, many suggested he had been kidnapped or had escaped to Mexico)—and whether someone else had placed his body in the futuristic car and sent it on its way. “Did someone put his corpse in the car? Remember, the car is fully self-driving,” the X account “End Wokeness,” with 3.4 million followers, posted. It got 4.8 million views.

The car had not been in self-driving mode, a deputy reiterated, citing data from Tesla engineers. There were also questions about how officials identified the body. “I want to give you a couple of photographs as to what it was that we had some conversations around,” McMahonill said, showing images on a large screen of distinctive tattoos that were still visible on the badly burned corpse.

On and on the briefing went, featuring details from the local coroner as well as surveillance photos and video of Livelsberger from the time he began his journey in Colorado until his arrival in Las Vegas.

“I thought they did a really good job,” said Yael Bar tur, who oversaw social media for the New York Police Department from 2014 to 2020 and is now an executive at Sitrick, the crisis communications firm.



Security personnel and pedestrians after the deadly attack in New Orleans. PHOTO: EDUARDO MUNOZ/REUTERS

‘Can’t afford to be quiet’

In New Orleans, authorities struggled with messaging after the New Year’s Day attack there in which a man killed 14 people after plowing into revelers with a pickup. First they declared it wasn’t a terrorist attack, before evidence emerged showing the suspect was inspired by ISIS. They initially said they thought he had accomplices, only to say later that he acted alone.

The lesson, Bar tur said, isn’t for authorities to stay quiet. To maintain public trust, they must join the discussion, albeit with quality information. “Back in the day you could be tight-lipped about something, before cellphone cameras, before social media. And you could close down a crime scene in a sense,” she said. “You can’t afford to be quiet anymore.”

Jim Bueermann, a former police chief who founded the Future Policing Institute, a think tank on innovation in the field, said it is crucial for police departments big and small to monitor social media feeds, fact-check claims and, when needed, create a counternarrative to boost

community trust. Filling an information void is vital, he said, “even if it’s just to say, ‘We don’t know the answer yet, but please don’t jump to conclusions.’ ”

The 30-officer police department in Parsons, Kan., empowers five employees to post to social media and used the tool when relatives of someone who died in an accidental shooting portrayed the incident as a homicide, said Police Chief Robert Spinks.

“We’ve gone to great lengths to make sure that we are never in a position where you ever hear the word ‘no comment’ from our agency,” he said. “If the ditch is empty, it’s going to get filled up with sewage, so you might as well put fresh water in there.”

By their nature, wildfires tend to spur confusion, whether it’s someone exaggerating the size of a blaze at night when that is harder to assess, or people sharing inaccurate evacuation orders, U.S. Forest Service spokesman John Miller said.

The confusion often stems from people listening to police scanners and hearing only snippets about fires, Miller said, standing under smoky skies outside the Rose Bowl, where firefighters have been gathering. “If you’re sitting at home listening on the radio, you’re going to take that as gospel,” he said.

Given the scale of the still-unfolding Los Angeles disaster, the desperation for answers and explanations—and propensity for misinformation—appears to be of another magnitude.

Erroneous or partly incorrect posts popped up almost as soon as the wildfires did. An early X post showed a burning hillside near the sign for the Getty Villa in Pacific Palisades. “GETTY VILLA GOES UP IN FLAMES,” it blared, adding that the museum is “currently ablaze.”



The Getty Villa had to repeatedly assure the public it was not in ruins from the fires. PHOTO: APU GOMES/GETTY IMAGES

The Getty, which operates a second museum elsewhere in Los Angeles, soon corrected the record, saying on X that some trees and vegetation had burned but not the villa. The staff and art collection, it said, were safe. A day later Getty again said the villa was intact.

Along with the Alex Jones post, Scott, the Los Angeles Fire Department's public-information officer, has publicly batted down a number of viral rumors.

"Clearing Up Online Misinformation," Scott wrote on X late Friday as he rebuffed two new fabrications, including a social-media falsehood circulating that the LAFD was so ill-equipped that it was recruiting the general public to fight wildfires. "Baseless," Scott wrote.

"We don't want all of that noise getting to the public," Scott explained Saturday. "We want to get them signal that is going to help them evacuate and potentially save their lives."

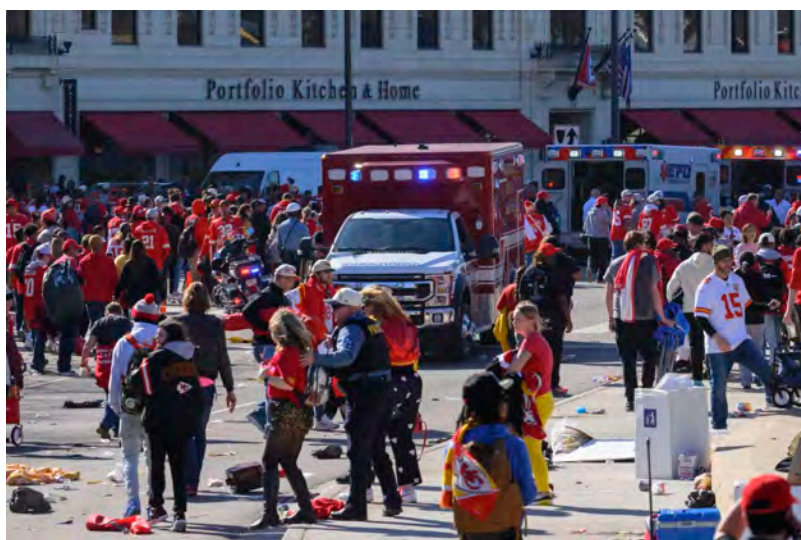
President-elect Donald Trump has also joined the social media fray. On his Truth Social platform, he blamed the fires on California Gov. Gavin Newsom, claiming the Democrat had refused to sign a "water restoration declaration" that would have brought additional water to the Los Angeles area. Musk shared the post with his 212 million X followers.

A Newsom aide countered with a statement that there was "no such document as the water restoration declaration—that is pure fiction."

Newsom on Saturday refuted a rumor that firetrucks sent from Oregon were being held in Sacramento for emissions testing. "This is false," he [said on X](#), calling it "offensive to the

brave men and women who are fighting on the frontlines right now.” He also has a “fire facts” webpage, with pronouncements such as this: “LIE: Governor Newsom is working with developers to change zoning in burned areas to allow ‘mass apartments.’ ”

Then there were outlandish claims like one about the outbreak of one fire supposedly stemming from a “satanic ritual” linked to a “creepy red-roof mansion that is straight out of a horror movie.” A reader note on X asserted that no such rumors were actually circulating: “The one and only mention is here because of a ‘red roof’ which isn’t (sic) uncommon.” Yet the post was seen more than four million times and shared more than 3,000 times.



Police clear the area following a shooting at the Kansas City Chiefs Super Bowl celebration in 2024. PHOTO: REED HOFFMANN/AP

None other than Henry Winkler, the Fonz from “Happy Days,” wrote on X: “THERE IS AN ARSONIST here in LA. May you be beaten you unrecognizable !!! The pain you have caused !!!”

The Los Angeles Fire Department responded that it wasn’t yet clear how the many separate blazes had started. Though police took a man into custody over a possible arson near where a new fire broke out on Thursday, officials said they lacked probable cause to arrest him for arson; he was instead arrested on a probation violation. A spokesman for Winkler said the actor wouldn’t be commenting further at this time.

It is a now-common predicament for public officials to have to decide when to address a rumor and when to let it lie. “A lot of the times, these lower-level things that are just not accurate, they go away,” said Anchorage Police Chief Sean Case.

Jacob Becchina, public information officer for the Kansas City Police Department, faced such a dilemma last year when a mass shooting marred the Chiefs' Super Bowl victory parade. The police said on social media they had taken two juvenile suspects in for questioning. Still, a post began circulating online about an adult with an Arabic-sounding name who was falsely identified as the shooter. In some posts he was referred to as an illegal immigrant. Soon right-wing politicians in other states began sharing those posts.

Becchina and his bosses ultimately decided to keep mum, fearing the department's large social media audience would amplify the misinformation and make matters worse. "I struggled a lot with it," he said, adding: "I often hear from people: 'I don't understand why we have to say anything at all.' That's fine—until you need the public's assistance."

One Saturday last month in Columbus, Ga., Deputy Police Chief Lance Deaton got a message from his father in Florida: "Hey, y'all investigating the serial killer in Columbus?" Deaton had no idea what he was talking about. His dad had spotted a Facebook post about a serial killer "on the run" in the state's second-largest city.

Deaton then received text messages from city council members and residents, as did some of his colleagues. By Monday, the rumor had blown up to the point where the police department assigned analysts to take a closer look. That led to a press release and local interviews dismissing it as a hoax.

"We knew we weren't working a serial killer, but I wanted to make sure that we had the right information before we put it out," Deaton said. "This was a whole lot more serious than a lot of the stuff people put out. But at this point, man, nothing surprises me."

—Sara Randazzo contributed to this article.

Write to Scott Calvert at scott.calvert@wsj.com and Joshua Chaffin at joshua.chaffin@wsj.com

Appeared in the January 13, 2025, print edition as 'L.A. Officials Race to Fight Rumors, Conspiracy Theories'.

NEXT ARTICLE

NEWS • News

Municipal water systems aren't designed to fight wildfires, but maybe they should be, experts say

Gov. Gavin Newsom is calling for an independent investigation into the 'causes of lost water supply and water pressure' during fierce LA County fires



A firefighter attaches a hose to a fire hydrant as a market burns behind him along Lake Avenue during the Eaton fire in Altadena Wednesday morning Jan. 8, 2025. Hundreds of homes have burned in the northern and eastern areas of Altadena which sits next to the San Gabriel Mountains north of Pasadena. (Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)



By **JASON HENRY** | jhenry@scng.com | Pasadena Star News

UPDATED: January 12, 2025 at 12:14 PM PST

Hydrants in the hills of the Pacific Palisades ran dry amid [one of the worst blazes](#) ever seen in Los Angeles County, forcing firefighters to scramble to draw water from pools and ponds or — even worse — watch as homes and businesses burned.

On the other side of the county, water pressure in Altadena dropped to a trickle at times as flames from [the Eaton Fire](#) destroyed neighborhoods.

As stories of firefighters [struggling to find water](#) circulated on social media and in the news, residents demanded answers. The response from local officials was consistent: municipal water systems just aren't designed to fight such intense and prolonged wildfires.

But as climate change makes what were once-in-a-lifetime disasters more common and the borders between urban and wildlands further narrow, stakeholders are now questioning if that needs to change.

Gov. Gavin Newsom on Friday, Jan. 10, called for an independent investigation into the “causes of lost water supply and water pressure” across Los Angeles County and has asked state and firefighting officials to identify what local governments can do to “provide adequate water supply for emergency responses during future catastrophic events.”

Among his concerns is the 117-million-gallon Santa Ynez Reservoir in Pacific Palisades, which was empty due to a maintenance project and could have potentially provided much-needed additional water on the first days of the Palisades fire.

Related: [A political firestorm rages as wildfires continue to burn across L.A.](#)

“The ongoing reports of loss of water pressure to some local fire hydrants during the fires and the reported unavailability of water supplies from the Santa Ynez Reservoir are deeply troubling to me and the community,” Newsom wrote in [a letter](#) to the leadership of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and L.A. County Public Works.

“While water supplies from local fire hydrants are not designed to extinguish wildfires over large areas, losing supplies from fire hydrants likely impaired the effort to protect some homes and evacuation corridors. We need answers to how that happened.”

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass, when asked about the dry hydrants at a press conference, pledged to complete a “deep dive” into the water supply issues once the fires are out. In the meantime, DWP deployed 19 mobile water tankers each carrying up to 4,000 gallons and the state later mobilized 140 more to augment the struggling water systems.

“We will look at what worked, we will look at what didn't work and we will let you know,” Bass said.

LADWP welcomes review

In a Jan. 11 statement, LADWP stressed that the water system serving “the Pacific Palisades area and all of the Los Angeles meets all federal and state fire codes for urban development and housing.”

“As we face the impacts of climate change and build climate resilience, we welcome a review and update of these codes and requirements if city water systems will be used to fight extreme wildfires,” the statement reads. “LADWP is initiating our own investigation about water resiliency and how to enhance our posture to respond to the impacts of climate change.”

LADWP was required to take the Santa Ynez Reservoir offline to comply with safe drinking water regulations while the city put a project to repair its cover out to bid early last year, documents showed.

Fixes won't be cheap

Experts agree that any upgrades to the water systems in these foothill communities won't come cheap or easy.

Gregory Pierce, a water researcher and co-director of UCLA's Water Resources Group, said residents of Pacific Palisades, for example, might need to bear the cost for special protections, which could include building more storage tanks to keep pressure up and backup power sources to sustain water pumps during outages.

Three reserve tanks used to supply hydrants at higher elevations and holding about a million gallons each were overwhelmed and drained one after another Tuesday night and early Wednesday morning. Those systems are typically overbuilt by as much as 40% specifically to provide capacity for fighting fires, Peirce said, but the demand during the first day of the Palisades fire was four times higher than usual and stayed at that level for 15 hours straight, according to city officials.

In its Jan. 11 statement, the LADWP pushed back against claims that any hydrants were broken and said only about 20% of the hydrants, mostly at higher elevations, ran out because of the surge in demand.

“If Palisades residents really want a super robust system to handle fires like this one, it would be unlike anything that exists in the world,” Pierce said. “That's going to cost an incredible amount, and that cost can't reasonably be borne by the entire city of Los Angeles.”

Even if there had been more water, unusually high winds grounded air support and accelerated the spread of the fires beyond what the available ground force could control, Pierce said.

“I'm not sure any level of preparedness from the water side would've stopped the fire,” Pierce said. “DWP is doing an analysis on this now. No one can say exactly what condition the pieces of infrastructure were in except the DWP, but there's no good reason to think that they performed anomalously. They were just overwhelmed because they aren't built for wildfires, and this was a very quick and ferocious start to a wildfire.”

At a [press conference](#) Wednesday, Pasadena Fire Chief Chad Augustin told reporters he wasn't surprised to hear water pressure dropped during the initial fight against the Eaton fire in Pasadena and unincorporated Altadena on Tuesday night. Winds reached up to 100 mph, launching embers as far as two miles away, he said.

"When you have multiple fires, multiple city blocks on fire, with — I'll throw a number out — a hundred fire engines flowing water, we are going to stretch our water system," Augustin said. "On top of that, we had a loss of power temporarily, which impacted our water system. I'll be clear, we could have had much more water, but with those wind gusts, we were not stopping that fire last night."

Rethinking water, power distribution

The water shortages at the Palisades and the Eaton fires make it clear that municipalities prone to wildfires need to rethink how they distribute water and power as extreme weather events become more frequent due to climate change, said Laurie Huning, an assistant professor in the Department of Civil Engineering and Construction Engineering Management at Cal State Long Beach. Hydrant systems designed around fighting one or two house fires may no longer cut it, she said.

"Much of the infrastructure we have was developed well before people were thinking about, or even considering, climate change," she said.

Climate scientists have attributed the [explosive nature of these fires](#) to what some are calling "[hydroclimate whiplash](#)," a phenomenon in which significant years of rainfall — and subsequent vegetative growth — are followed by extremely dry periods, effectively turning hillsides into tinderboxes.

These types of system failures during wildfires aren't new, unfortunately. Most recently, firefighters experienced an almost identical issue with hydrants at higher elevations running low during the Mountain fire in Camarillo in November, according to the [Ventura County Star](#).



Firefighters work a hydrant in front of the burning Bunny Museum in Altadena on Jan. 8 (AP Photo/Chris Pizzello, File)

Technical assessments needed

Still, the cities and the county should bring in outside technical experts to assess the pressure issues and to determine how to prevent recurrences in the future, said Michael Stenstrom, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at UCLA.

While the Santa Ynez Reservoir may have helped out if it had been operational, there also are other reservoirs and dams abandoned throughout Los Angeles County because “we didn’t want to spend the money” to complete seismic retrofitting, he said. Each of those could potentially supply water in emergencies if they were returned to operation.

Other obvious improvements could be made systemwide as well, he said, such as accelerating the City of Los Angeles’ replacement of century-old pipes or building more pump stations — and more resilient power sources — near fire-prone areas to ensure reliable water pressure during emergencies. It will require political will, significant financing, likely decades of time and stronger, and perhaps unpopular, regulations, he said.

Stenstrom is hopeful this disaster will serve as a catalyst to spur city and county officials to take bold action.

“After a big earthquake, there’s always more willpower to increase codes and improve building safety,” Stenstrom said. “We’ll probably see that with respect to fire safety after this one, at least I hope we do, and I hope we can be very aggressive about it.”

Originally Published: January 11, 2025 at 1:01 PM PST

NEXT ARTICLE

[Los Angeles fires](#)[Eaton fire evacuations](#)[Palisades fire evacuations](#)[Wildfire resource guide](#)[Hi](#)

CALIFORNIA

Power lines? Old embers? Arson? Investigators, experts, amateurs look for cause of L.A. fires



The Palisades fire spreads through Mandeville Canyon toward Encino on Friday. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

By Kevin Rector and Ian James

Jan. 12, 2025 4:32 PM PT

- Investigators are beginning their work to determine the origin and cause of the devastating fires in Los Angeles.

- The work will likely take months, if not longer, as investigators consider a slew of potential factors.

As Los Angeles reels from the astonishing losses of the firestorms, one question holds profound economic, financial and political consequences: What sparked the fires?

The Palisades and Eaton fires have burned more than 12,000 structures and are expected to be the most costly fires in American history, with [estimates ranging](#) from \$50 billion to [\\$150 billion](#).

Residents are comparing notes on what they saw in the hills around them in the run-up to the blazes. Utilities are looking into nearby faults in their equipment. Politicians are pointing fingers. Online sleuths are sharing video and other purported evidence on social media platforms.



Increasing winds bring potential for ‘explosive fire growth’ across L.A. County this week

There was a small blaze near the site of the [massive Palisades fire](#) a week before, on New Year’s Day. Could old embers have been rekindled? Homes that burned in [the Eaton fire](#) appeared to still have power amid high winds before the inferno sparked. Were downed power lines to blame? A “person of interest” was identified in the [Kenneth fire](#). Are any of the blazes the work of arsonists?

Officials so far have been circumspect and careful. They don’t have solid answers just yet, but they will, they said — just as soon as they can complete the complex and often months-long “origin and cause” investigations that are only just beginning now.

“There’s a lot of misinformation floating around, and a lot of people want answers — which is understandable. And we will provide those answers,” said Ginger Colbrun, a

spokeswoman for the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the lead agency investigating the cause of the Palisades fire. “But we have to get additional people here and investigate.”

The ATF’s National Response Team — one of the nation’s most renowned units for investigating mass disasters — is handling the Palisades fire and will get to the bottom of it, Colbrun said. But with the fire still burning, burn patterns shifting and new evacuation orders still coming out, investigators still need time to gather the facts.

“To jump to any conclusions right now is speculation,” she said. She could not offer a timeline for when the investigation would be concluded.

The same is true for other investigations across the region being led by other city, county and state agencies with fire investigation expertise — which are splitting the workload with the ATF given the number of fires and the complexity of the work.



CALIFORNIA

Officials investigating whether Southern California Edison equipment ignited Hurst fire

Jan. 12, 2025

Investigations into the cause of blazes as large and intense as these L.A. fires often take months, if not longer. After the massive wildfire that killed more than 100 people on Maui in August 2023, for example, the ATF’s National Response Team took more than a year to investigate — only issuing their official findings on the cause in October 2024.

Experts said the cause of wildfires, including those that sweep into urban areas, can be extremely difficult to investigate — for obvious reasons, including the intensity and temperature of such large blazes destroying nearly everything in their path.

“You’re basically throwing a crime scene in an oven,” said Michael Wara, director of the Climate and Energy Policy Program at Stanford University and a former California wildfire commissioner.

However, the science behind fire investigations has become extremely advanced and technical, he said — and in urban environments can draw on huge amounts of available data, including from utilities.

**LIVE**

Every wildfire currently burning in California

Getting to a cause for these fires will be critically important, Wara said, as that information can help L.A. and other cities avoid [similar fires in the future](#). But for the same reason, it is more important to reach the correct conclusions than to rush to an answer, he said.

“We need to be respectful of the process and let the process play out,” he said. “We also want to be pushing to make sure that the process is full and complete.”

One thing to keep in mind about such fires, Wara said, is that it is not necessarily the case that there is a single origin or cause. Sometimes, massive fires have multiple origin points, especially amid the sort of weather L.A. has experienced recently, with Santa Ana winds blowing at unusually high speeds.

Wara said a major question he has is about utility decisions — by Southern California Edison and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power — to either cut power to lines amid the high winds or to leave them electrified.

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

Intensifying climate ‘whiplash’ set the stage for devastating California fires

Jan. 9, 2025



SCE has said it cut power, but that is in question, he said. LADWP generally does not cut power, banking on the efforts it has made to stabilize and strengthen its lines, including by putting them on steel rather than wooden poles.

A major issue in winds as powerful as those last week, he said, is “blow-in” — or material such as tree branches that can fly through the air and strike power lines even from a distance, even if the lines’ immediate easement area has been well maintained and cleared by a utility.

Wara said the investigations into the fires’ origins will likely include the collection of data from utilities, including from individual homeowners’ meters, about what was happening on the electrical grid in the early hours of the fires.

If LADWP lines did cause the Palisades fire, it could be costly for the city financially, he said. Private utilities found at fault in past fires have been forced to pay out billions of dollars to victims. Some portion of the damage could be paid by the [state’s Wildfire Fund](#).



CALIFORNIA

The L.A. fire victims: Who they were

Jan. 12, 2025

Dean Florez, a member of the California Air Resources Board and former state senator, said that although the investigations are now examining a number of potential ignition sources, “if history is any indication, power lines remain a primary focus.”

“The past has taught us that utility equipment is a leading cause of California’s deadliest wildfires. This historical pattern cannot be ignored when discussing preventive measures,” Florez said. “The real issue here isn’t just how these fires might have started, but how preventable they might have been.”

He said the state, through the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), has undercut its wildfire prevention strategy by reducing funding for programs to put power transmission lines underground, which he said is a proven long-term solution to reduce wildfire risk.



CALIFORNIA

How to help those affected by fires raging across Los Angeles County

Jan. 10, 2025

“Yes, undergrounding is expensive at \$3 [million to] \$4 million per mile, but it pales in comparison to the catastrophic costs of wildfires like those devastating Los Angeles County, which can easily exceed \$500 billion in damages,” Florez said.

He said he believes the CPUC has inadvertently allowed these risks to persist “by favoring lower-cost, less effective strategies such as insulated wires and vegetation management while deprioritizing undergrounding.”

The utilities Southern California Edison and PG&E have made progress in reducing fire risks by placing some transmission lines underground, Florez said, and as a result have reported significant declines in utility-sparked fires in high-risk areas. But he said the CPUC’s funding cuts have forced utilities to reduce these efforts, and that even SCE’s modest plan to put 100 miles of power lines underground this year is at risk.

Investigators in recent days have appeared focused in part on an area around [an electrical transmission tower](#) in Eaton Canyon that burned, with officials acknowledging

their work there was part of the investigation into the start of the Eaton fire. Edison says it has seen no evidence to suggest that its power equipment sparked the fire.



CALIFORNIA

Investigators study Eaton Canyon electrical tower area as possible origin of Altadena fire

Jan. 12, 2025

One other theory that [recently arose](#) for the Palisades fire is that a fire in the area a week prior — caused by fireworks in the early morning hours of New Year's Day — had been rekindled by the high winds, despite the Los Angeles Fire Department having previously stomped it out.

Colbrun said such a link right now is just speculation, though investigators will be considering all possible causes for the blaze.

Sources with knowledge of the investigation told The Times officials were aware of the earlier fire and its general proximity to the starting point of the Palisades fire, and looking into whether they are related. People have been known to hang out in the area, and the sources said it's possible someone there on Tuesday sparked another blaze in the same location.

Wara said such an origin would be possible. He cited as an example the massive Hermit's Peak-Calf Canyon fire in New Mexico, which arose after remnants of a prescribed burn set by the U.S. Forest Service rekindled. The Oakland Hills firestorm in 1991 also began after a smaller fire wasn't fully extinguished.



CALIFORNIA

L.A. wildfire resource guide: How to stay safe, what to do and how to help

Jan. 10, 2025

It's also possible that the Palisades fire could have been caused by multiple things at once, Wara said. As an example, he cited the Marshall fire in Boulder, Colo., which was caused both by a damaged power line and by embers from a week-old trash fire.

"There could be multiple ignitions that happen nearly at the same time and place," Wara said.

Until more evidence is gathered, it will be impossible to reach any conclusions about what started L.A.'s fires, Wara said. But getting to the right answer is important, he said.

"We need to learn from these urban firestorms," Wara said, "so we can figure out ways so they don't happen again."

Los Angeles Times reporter Richard Winton contributed to this article.

More to Read

Death toll from Palisades and Eaton fires climbs to 25. What we know about those killed

1 hour ago



Commentary: Wildfires come with the wildness that draws us to Los Angeles

Jan. 12, 2025



Firefighters gain ground on deadly L.A. wildfires, but more wind is on the way

Jan. 11, 2025



Kevin Rector

NEXT ARTICLE

Los Angeles County wildfires: The ongoing fight to stop the fires and the devastation of neighborhoods

60

By Bill Whitaker

Updated on: January 12, 2025 / 8:52 PM EST / CBS News



60
MINUTES

The FIRES

produced by Nichole Marks
Marc Lieberman & Heather Abbott



00:11 / 13:12



Now Playing



L.A. fires devastate families, firefighters



1/12/2025: The Fires; The FBI Director; The G...



The Fires | Sunday on 60 Minutes



The [Eaton Fire](#) burst out of the San Gabriel mountains above Altadena Tuesday night. It has since devoured more than 7,000 homes and structures in this tight-knit, diverse community making it one of the most savage firestorms in Los Angeles County's history. The [death toll](#) is rising. Wildfires are a fact of life here - but nothing prepared people for destruction on this scale.

Rows of chimneys now stand like tombstones, towering palm trees like burned matchsticks. We found fire crews still working to contain the inferno and a dazed Calvin family sifting through the ruins of their homes and their lives.

Zaire Calvin: This is unreal. Oh my god. My house.

Zaire Calvin and his family have called Altadena home for three generations.

Zaire Calvin: Just wonder if anything's left. The-- the rocking chair for the baby. (crying) I literally just built all of this.

Calvin, a high school football coach, has lived on this block his whole life. He's seen a number of wildfires flare up in the foothills, but never in his 47 years had he seen anything like the firestorm that swept off the mountain this past Tuesday.

Zaire Calvin: And out of nowhere you see the fire appear across Lake Street. And you could see it going up the mountain on our side within an hour. For it to move that quickly and that rapidly and for it to shift paths that fast was insane.

His son Jamire told us the winds kicked up and power went down across the neighborhood.

Jamire Calvin: It was like a hurricane, just fire, no water, with like 80 miles an hour plus. It felt surreal.

Bill Whitaker: Was the fire, like, racing down the hill at that point?

Jamire Calvin: Yeah.

Zaire Calvin: That's what's scary about this. It just was shooting -

Bill Whitaker: Like a blowtorch?

Zaire Calvin: Like a blowtorch. It was literally just shooting off of the mountain. It felt like you're being attacked by a storm.

Jamire Calvin: Yeah.



Bill Whitaker speaks with Jamire and Zaire Calvin about the California fires

60 MINUTES

As the fire bore down on them, Zaire put his wife, baby and mother into the car. Jamire grabbed what he could.

Jamire Calvin: I'm lucky to even have the little bag of clothes that I have left. But as far as trophies, memories, diplomas, everything else just went up in flames.

Zaire Calvin: My mom just said it to me. She's like, everything's gone? You mean the books that we have, like, nothing? I'm just like, Mom, it's all gone. All of it. Every memory, all those things are gone. We have whatever's left in our heads to rebuild with. All of it's gone.

This fire in Altadena was just one of eight destructive wildfires that lay siege to Los Angeles this past week. With almost no rain for eight months, hillsides and backyards were bone dry, primed to burn. Investigators are still trying to determine how the fires started, but whipped by ferocious Santa Ana winds, those blazes roared down city streets and spread like a deadly virus. No place seemed immune. Neighborhoods not engulfed in flames were blanketed by smoke and ash. Wealth and status offered no protection. Affluent Pacific Palisades was first to fall. Thousands of structures were destroyed. Thousands of people were forced to flee.

Chief Anthony Marrone: The conditions, that night, were unbearable. It was a devil wind that came out, you know, that extreme Santa Ana wind condition.

Anthony Marrone is chief of the L.A. County Fire Department, one of the officials overseeing the firefight. He told us the devil winds hurled embers far ahead of the fire - like snowfall from hell.

Chief Anthony Marrone: Embers like this are transported in the smoke column and-- and pushed--

Bill Whitaker: Something as big as this--

Chief Anthony Marrone: --downwind-- or bigger.

Bill Whitaker: So this is being blown by the winds way beyond -

Chief Anthony Marrone: Thousands and thousands of burning embers, this size and bigger, being transported by that wind and that smoke column.

Chief Marrone says fires normally run uphill.

Chief Anthony Marrone: But with these winds it was pushed downhill into these neighborhoods.

Bill Whitaker: And sending these embers blocks, if not miles ahead--



Bill Whitaker and Chief Anthony Marrone

Chief Anthony Marrone: Right. And the embers were being generated not only by the brush on the hillsides but by the homes that are burning.

When the life-threatening winds started building, Marrone told us he called up extra crews and engines. But the fires grew too big, too fast. Demand for water overburdened the system. Water pressure dropped and fire hoses ran dry while the fires raged.

Bill Whitaker: We hear that people were complaining that there wasn't enough water or wasn't enough water pressure. Was that a-- factor?

Chief Anthony Marrone: Ye-- well, so the water system was stretched. Metropolitan water systems are not designed to sustain a fire fight like this. Your viewers can't expect a municipal water system to supply enough firefighting water to extinguish every one of these houses. That's unrealistic.

Bill Whitaker: Did you have enough resources? Did you have enough firefighters? Did you have enough fire engines?

Chief Anthony Marrone: No. And there's-- and there's not enough fire engines for this.

Bill Whitaker: Ordinarily for one house like this, you might have three, or four, or five--

Chief Anthony Marrone: Three or four fire engines. We - we think we've lost 8,000 structures, so times three fire engines each, that-- that requires 26,000 fire engines. I don't think the state of California has 26,000 fire engines that could be at one place, right now.

Bill Whitaker: You, your firefighters, your resources ... everything, overwhelmed?

Chief Anthony Marrone: Absolutely overwhelmed.

Chief Brian Fennessy: Mother Nature owned us, owned us those two days.

Neighboring Orange County Fire Chief Brian Fennessy has been fighting wildfires for almost five decades. He dispatched hundreds of firefighters to help Chief Marrone and beleaguered crews across L.A. One of the most powerful tools in their arsenal: this fleet of high-tech choppers that can fight fires 24/7, dropping up to 3,000 gallons of water each pass. But with Santa Ana winds gusting near 100 miles per hour, the choppers were grounded during crucial early hours.

Chief Brian Fennessy: The fires that they experienced this week were unstoppable.

Bill Whitaker: Unstoppable.

Chief Brian Fennessy: Unstoppable.

Bill Whitaker: What's it like for you, a firefighter, to have to say words like that?

Chief Brian Fennessey: It makes me feel bad. Right? I mean, that's not in our nature. I mean, we're-- we're fixers. That is the mindset: We're gonna put our lives on the line. We're gonna, give a lot to save a lot. So when you have a fire like you say that's unstoppable? Man, that is-- it's-- it's uncomfortable. It's very uncomfortable.



Chief Brian Fennessey

80 MINUTES

After an uncomfortable 27-hour delay, the choppers were able to get back into the fight when the winds died down. Thursday, Chief Fennessey let us join a reconnaissance flight, so we could see the destruction from above.

We flew over the fire zones, and saw an ashen checkerboard of devastation stretched below us for miles at Pacific Palisades. When we flew over Altadena where Chief Fennessey grew up - he found it hard to get his bearings:

Chief Fennessey: Oh, my goodness. It really wiped it out, man.

Bill Whitaker: Oh, wow.

Chief Fennessey: Holy crud. The Rose Bowl is just down.

Bill Whitaker: Yeah.

Chief Fennessey: Kind of orient you, you can see the Rose Bowl from here. I had no idea it extended this far. You can see charred buildings, warehouses.

Bill Whitaker: Everything gone.

Chief Fennessey: Gone, yeah.

In the early morning hours after the Altadena fire erupted, Chief Fennessy couldn't reach his brother. Although it was out of his jurisdiction, he drove up from Orange County.

When he learned his brother was safe, he went to check on his long-time friend Tony Goss and this is what he found.

Chief Brian Fennessy: This place was glowing. It was completely hot, there was a gas main over here that was venting, and so it was like a jet engine. It was pretty loud. Tony's still in his pajamas. He looks like a firefighter, his face is, you know, black from all the soot, and-- he's walking around, you know, I don't know if you remember this. You were walkin' around, kinda talkin' to yourself.

Goss had tried to save his home armed with just a garden hose, but the fire was too fierce. When we met him, he was still in disbelief that he'd been forced to walk away from his family home of more than 60 years. But this was gone.

Tony Goss: I knew it was time to leave, so I pulled out and all my neighbors were right there. I said, no, it's time. It's time. I don't need to die today.

Chief Fennessy then went down the road to his brother's house. The block was in flames. He discovered the gas meter at the house next door was surrounded by fire and about to ignite. And, he said, there was no water ...

Chief Brian Fennessy: So I needed to cool this down.

So Fennessy got creative.

Chief Brian Fennessy: I ended up forcing entry into-- through the front door and went through the house, you know into the kitchen looking for bottled water, anything that-- that I could use. And so I ended up finding-- a carton of milk and, I think there were a couple beers or sodas, whatever the heck they were. And came out here and really literally had to kinda go in there under the heat, wet it, and then get out. Because it was just, this house was just burning and, and I had to do that a few times till it was done, and--

Bill Whitaker: Bet you've never saved a house with milk before.

Chief Brian Fennessy: No. To do nothing means the home's gonna be lost. And in this case, yeah, you know, little bit of milk and a couple beers really saved the day.

The houses he fought to save are the only two left standing on the block. The devil winds are forecast to intensify again tomorrow through Wednesday. Evacuation orders have been expanded. The city remains on edge.

Chief Brian Fennessy: These fires are gonna be an impact, you know, to the community, families, people, for many, many years to come. This is one of those fires, if not the fire, that they're gonna be telling their grandchildren about.

In the chaos of evacuating his baby and elderly mother to safety, Zaire Calvin got separated from his sister Evelyn. She lived next door.

Zaire Calvin: Everybody's yelling, "Get out." I'm thinking that she's getting out. And the next day after the storm-- I come back, and her car's still there. So at that point, in my brain, my soul is shaking.

He and his cousin found Evelyn's remains in the rubble.

Zaire's grief is shared. Five Calvin family members lived on this block. Four lost their houses. But they're trying to hold onto the hope that they can rebuild their beloved community.

Zaire Calvin: Everyone's in the same boat. Like, everybody you would depend on, everybody you would go to, they're all homeless also. They just lost everything. They've lost all their memories, all the joy. Everything that we've built together in this neighborhood we all lost together. And I hate it. I hate it, 'cause I love Altadena. (voice breaks, shakes head)

Produced by Nichole Marks, Marc Lieberman, Heather Abbott. Associate producers: John Gallen, Katie Kerbstat, Cassidy McDonald, LaCrai Scott. Broadcast associates: Grace Conley, Mariah Johnson, Mimi Lamarre. Edited by Peter M. Berman, Warren Lustig.

NEXT ARTICLE

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

Could better brush clearance have helped slow the spread of the Palisades fire?



A home is consumed by flames from the Palisades fire, which ignited Jan. 7 amid hurricane-force winds, with [gusts of up to 100 mph](#) recorded in some areas. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

By Alex Wigglesworth
Staff Writer

Jan. 13, 2025 3 AM PT

- Destruction from the Palisades fire could have been tempered had officials cleared brush in wildland areas, which could have slowed its spread, some critics say
- Fire officials and others dispute those claims, saying bone-dry conditions and fierce winds made the fire unstoppable.

The allegations flew as fast as the flames. The Palisades fire raging through the coastal mountains of Los Angeles, rich and powerful critics said, wouldn't have been quite so devastating had authorities done a better job of clearing hillside brush.

“We knew the winds were coming. We knew that there was brush that needed to be cleared 20 years ago,” Rick Caruso, the developer and former Los Angeles mayoral candidate, told The Times. “This fire could have been mitigated — maybe not prevented.”

Elon Musk [wrote on X](#) that the “biggest factor, in my opinion, is that crazy environmental regulations prevent building firebreaks and clearing brush near houses.” And [actress-producer Sara Foster](#) chimed in with an X post saying “our vegetation was overgrown, brush not cleared.”



Increasing winds bring potential for ‘explosive fire growth’ across L.A. County this week

Did these and other second-guessers have a point? Scientists, wildfire specialists and firefighting officials had differing viewpoints. But several of these experts — including strong proponents of brush clearance — said that the winds fanning the flames were so fierce, and ground conditions so dry, that clearing more shrubs wouldn't have had a significant effect.

“All of the brush clearance, fuel breaks — they’re very effective on what we would consider a normal day,” said Chief Brian Fennessy of the Orange County Fire Authority. “But what you’re talking about here is probably less than 1% of all the fires that we respond to in Southern California.”

The Palisades fire ignited Jan. 7 amid hurricane-force winds, with [gusts of up to 100 mph](#) recorded in some areas.

“You could have put a 10-lane freeway in front of that fire and it would not have slowed it one bit,” Fennessy said.

Vegetation management efforts are typically most effective when firefighters are able to take advantage of the reduced fire intensity they provide to snuff out flames.

In this case, Fennessy said, fire was blowing sideways from house to house, with the structures themselves serving as fuel. The winds grounded firefighting aircraft. And firefighters on the ground were focused on getting people out of the path of the fast-moving inferno as it burned deeply into communities.



CALIFORNIA

The L.A. fire victims: Who they were

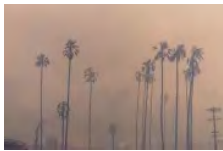
Jan. 12, 2025

Several experts noted that the intense gusts [lofted embers miles from the fire front](#), essentially spreading flames through the air — not by brush. They also pointed out that landscape-level fuel reduction, in which brush is cut back over large swaths of land, is controversial in Southern California’s sensitive coastal ecosystems.

In the forests of Northern California and the Sierra Nevada, large blazes are often [stoked by a buildup of trees and brush](#) that accumulated due to decades of fire suppression. Removing some of that vegetation can help make those forests both

more fire-resilient and healthier, since an abundance of plants competing for finite resources makes the ecosystem more sensitive to drought, said Patrick T. Brown, co-director of the climate and energy team at the Breakthrough Institute, an environmental think tank.

Modeling by the nonprofit suggests that clearing brush — and thus eliminating fuel — can reduce the intensity of wildfires in the Los Angeles Basin even during extreme weather, Brown said, although it's not likely to have prevented the kind of destruction Pacific Palisades is experiencing now.



SCIENCE & MEDICINE

How to protect yourself from the smoke caused by L.A. wildfires

Jan. 8, 2025

At the same time, he said, unlike in forested areas, fuel reduction in the region's chaparral shrublands risks harming the ecosystem rather than making it healthier.

That's because the Santa Monica mountains, Malibu canyons and other wildland areas near coastal Los Angeles generally burn too frequently, said Alexandra Syphard, senior research ecologist at the nonprofit Conservation Biology Institute and adjunct professor at San Diego State University.

That's caused native evergreen chaparral shrubs, which take several years to mature and make new seeds, to be replaced by invasive annual grasses that die in the early summer and catch fire more easily, said Helen Holmlund, biology professor at Pepperdine University.

"That promotes more frequent fires which, in turn, leads to more loss of chaparral shrubs and more invasive species," she said.

Large-scale attempts to preemptively thin or burn these coastal areas could therefore actually make the landscape more flammable in the long run, said Max Moritz, a cooperative extension wildfire specialist at UC Santa Barbara.

“Those are trade-offs that, as a society, you have to think about if they’re worthwhile,” Moritz said.

Given the weather conditions, Moritz is skeptical that more landscape-level brush clearance would have done much to slow the fire’s initial spread. He also noted that landscape-level brush management is distinct from brush clearance around

individual homes, which is typically the responsibility of the property owner and can help give firefighters opportunities to protect structures.

Still, Joe Ten Eyck, who coordinates wildfire and urban interface programs for the International Assn. of Firefighters, said extreme weather conditions can make brush clearance even more important.

“The more we take away the fuel for a fire to burn, the more we’re going to lessen the risk and make individual residences and communities resilient,” said Ten Eyck, who is also a retired operations chief with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS**Inside the dash to save the Getty Villa from the Palisades fire: A timeline****Jan. 9, 2025**

In fact, the Getty Villa [credited its pruned landscaping and irrigated grounds](#) with helping to save the museum’s structures from the Palisades fire.

Ventura County fire officials also said that residents’ compliance with a strictly enforced county ordinance requiring 100 feet of brush clearance around buildings, as well as other fire-resistant construction features, helped firefighters defend homes from [the Kenneth fire](#) that spread through the West Hills area Jan. 9.

Although the winds weren’t as fierce as in previous days, they were still strong, said Scott Dettorre, public information officer for the Ventura County Fire Department.

Los Angeles has similar rules for homes in fire-prone areas, although Fire Chief Kristin Crowley [wrote in a Dec. 4 memo to the Board of Fire Commissioners](#) that a \$7-million reduction in overtime funding had hindered her department’s ability to carry out inspections ensuring residents were complying, among other tasks.



CALIFORNIA

L.A. wildfire resource guide: How to stay safe, what to do and how to help

Jan. 10, 2025

But even those efforts can only help so much during the most extreme events, said Jason Moghaddas, fire ecologist and registered professional forester for think tank Spatial Informatics Group, and his colleague, Carrie Levine, co-lead of the group's forest and agriculture domain.

Once a fire reaches clusters of buildings, the structures themselves become the fuel, they said. Moghaddas pointed to [the Sunset Boulevard area](#), where the Palisades fire burned fire-hardened buildings like concrete commercial structures surrounded by pavement.

“It’s all these cascading probabilities — you can improve your chances of survivability, improve the chance that firefighters will protect your home, improve the chance that flame lengths will be lower ... but somewhere all those probabilities show up on the ground in real life and the fire tests them,” he said. “And you can see, ‘well, there wasn’t enough there to change the outcome.’”



CALIFORNIA

Sunset Boulevard in ruins: Fire's massive scale comes into focus in Pacific Palisades

Jan. 8, 2025

Times staff writers Matt Hamilton and David Zahniser contributed to this report

More to Read