

NEWS CLIPS

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**Resource Conservation and Public
Outreach**

Organized by date

Blaze leaves neighborhoods vulnerable to mud, floods

After Thomas Fire, homes at risk in rain

Cheri Carlson | Ventura County Star USA TODAY NETWORK
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Crews worked in a Ventura barranca Thursday, hauling trees and brush up a steep hill off Buena Vista Street.

It's one of the spots local officials worry will flood this winter as storms hit vulnerable hillsides burned by the Thomas Fire.

The fire that has destroyed more than 1,000 structures in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties left scorched, bare hills from Santa Paula to Ventura to the Ojai Valley. When the rain hits those slopes, it could trigger flash floods and debris flows.

"Our first order of business is to figure out where it's going to get bad," said county Public Works Director Jeff Pratt.



Michael Stevens cuts down sections of a downed tree in the Sanjon Barranca near Buena Vista Street in Ventura on Thursday as the Ventura County Public Works Department clears the area. PHOTOS BY ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR



Burned brush covers the landscape in a canyon leading into the Sanjon Barranca in Ventura on Thursday after the Thomas Fire swept through the area.

“We want homeowners to start protecting their properties now.”

Jim O’Tousa County geologist

County employees will work with other agencies to get the word out to people in those spots.

But there might not be much time. January and February typically are the county’s rainiest months.

“Right now, the long-range forecasters are saying it’s 50-50,” Pratt said. “Could be a dry year. Could be a wet year.”

Even one storm, however, could cause major problems, depending on just how quickly the rain falls.

After a fire, a lot more rain will run off the hills instead of soaking into the soil. That means a lot more water filling channels and drains, along with ash, burned brush and trees.

“We’re going to worry every time it rains,” county geologist Jim O’Tousa said. “It’s not just this first year or second year. It’s going to be a three- to five-year recovery.”

Plans call for clearing anything in the channels that could end blocking storm drains. If those get blocked, the water and debris will build up and spill over the top, potentially flooding streets and neighborhoods.

In the meantime, county officials urged residents to get prepared.

“We want homeowners to start protecting their properties now because it is a race against the rain,” O’Tousa said.

Anyone below a burned hillside could be at risk. But county officials said flooding and debris flows also can happen along creeks and drainages downstream from those burn areas.

They recommended residents go to <http://venturacountyrecovers.org> and click on the “rain ready” button for more information about risks, steps to take and flood insurance.

People who ordinarily wouldn’t think about buying flood insurance need to start thinking about that, Pratt said. Coverage typically needs 30 days to take effect.

With the fire now 92 percent contained, federal and state teams have started assessing areas burned throughout the two counties and potential hazards. That information will be shared with local agencies, which also will have staff surveying by ground and by air.

“We are looking at all the hillsides and barrancas,” said Sergio Vargas, deputy director of the Ventura County Watershed Protection District.

“This is a hot spot. This is why we started here,” Vargas said of the Sanjon Barranca.

The drain that runs down the canyon and through the city has had problems before, he said. The fire made those worse.

The hills above Ventura also have another layer of vulnerability — a softer kind of rock that’s more prone to erosion.

“We have slides and we have had debris flows even in years when we had vegetation,” O’Tousa said. “But we expect a lot more debris flows following the fire.”

It’s like the hills were made of sugar, Vargas said. When the water hits them, they will melt.

Plans also called for installing debris racks to trap the branches and rocks before they reach a culvert.

As crews worked in the canyon off his street, John Zilles walked up the hill toward his home. The night the Thomas Fire raced through the hills, he was sure his house would burn.

He saw several of his neighbors’ homes in flames, but by morning, his was still standing. There was a lull in the wind, Zilles said. That’s what saved it.

“We didn’t have any property damage, fortunately,” he said. They did lose the landscaping and had work done in the weeks since to help protect the property from winter storms.

The bigger issue, he said, will be the hills above the neighborhood.

After the fire, Zilles walked up the canyon, something that used to be impossible because of all the thick brush. Now, it’s like a moonscape.

The bare soil that’s left felt granular, he said.

“It’s like loose sand. You could put your hand into the mountainside in some places.”

He doesn’t remember any big debris flows there in recent years, likely because of all the vegetation.

“But it’s coming,” he said.

Rancho Las Virgenes Composting Facility
will be closed on the following Saturdays:

December 23 - Christmas weekend
December 30 - New Year's weekend

**Community Compost or
Recycled Water will not be
available.**

For more information, visit
www.LVMWD.com/community-compost
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Salmon lose way after truck ride in drought

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ventura County Star 12/27/2017

SACRAMENTO - A desperate decision to truck California's native baby salmon toward the Pacific Ocean during the state's drought may have resulted in generations of lost young salmon now hardpressed to find their way back to their reproductive grounds. With fewer native fall-run Chinook salmon able to make their way back home to the leading salmon hatchery in the state, that hatchery could have only about half as many young salmon as usual to release next spring, the Sacramento Bee reported Tuesday.

For those involved in safeguarding California's struggling native salmon, it had always been understood that resorting to tanker trucks to carry tiny salmon to the ocean during the drought was a trade-off, John McManus, executive director of the fishing industry's Golden State Salmon Association, told the Bee. Getting a lift on their migration saved countless salmon, but disoriented them. "Everybody kind of acknowledged and understood at the time the consequences," McManus said.

Native salmon historically anchored food chains and habitats on both land and in the water in California. Salmon still boost the state's economy by \$1.4 billion annually, the salmon industry says.

Dams that cut off native salmon from their former upstream spawning grounds, and general human demands on water, have helped cut their numbers drastically in the state, making state and federal hatcheries

crucial for the fish.

California's drought, declared over just last spring, included some of the driest spells ever recorded in the state. In 2014 and 2015, hatchery managers resorted to sucking baby salmon into tanker trucks for their 280-mile migration toward the ocean, biologists say. Chinook salmon spend two or three years in the ocean before heading back upstream to reproduce. Since the 2014 class of salmon didn't learn the route by swimming it on its own power, many have gone astray as they head back upstream now.

Biologists say only a small fraction of those made it back to what would be their usual point of return, the Coleman National Fish Hatchery. Salmon managers are tracking now how many of the strayed fish wound up in other watersheds

Getting a lift saved countless salmon, but disoriented them.

Tearing at the tree canopy



BIOLOGIST Rosi Dagit holds a piece of a residue-covered willow in the Santa Monica Mountains. Drought, fungi and insects are ravaging streamside trees. (Mel Melcon Los Angeles Times)

By Louis Sahagun
LA Times 12/26/2017

When biologist Rosi Dagit wants to give people a glimpse of the urgency of the problem afflicting trees in the Santa Monica Mountains, she takes them to a withering oasis in Topanga Canyon where hundreds of sycamores, alders and willows are dead and dying.

Just six years ago, the creek offered all the arboreal comforts needed for frogs, newts and protected fish such as Arroyo chubs and steelhead trout to avoid extinction: leafy canopies to control water temperature and prevent algae blooms, and willows buzzing with insects for nourishment.

Now, streamside trees weakened by drought are being ravaged by fungal diseases and swarms of insects the size of sesame seeds — imperiling not only the lush canopy but all the creatures that live in the stream.

During a recent tour, Dagit saw damage almost everywhere she looked. Willows had lost their leaves from a fungal pathogen that coated their boughs with a crusty white residue. Sycamores and alders were splotted with half-dollar-size lesions caused by tiny beetles. Native shrubs were giving way to weeds.

On a 150-foot stretch of creek lined with 78 trees, Dagit counted only 15 still alive.

“The ecological consequences of losing all these trees are profound and, on a personal level, so sad,” said Dagit, a senior biologist for the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains.

New surveys of the 154,000-acre Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area conducted by remote sensing instruments on NASA aircraft and teams on the ground revealed a loss of about 9,100 — or 6% — of coast live oaks, and 114,000 — or 32% — of riparian trees including sycamores, alders and willows during the five years of severe drought that ended in 2017. About 38% of the area’s chaparral also died, NASA scientists said.

Ripple effects on the environment may already be underway. For example, mayflies, which float on the surface and are an easily accessible food for fish and frogs, have been replaced by tiny chironomid midges, which spend much of their lives hiding in sunken leaves. Whether Topanga Canyon’s fish and frogs adapt to the shift remains to be seen, scientists say.

Dying trees and shrubs have exacerbated the plight of western pond turtles, California’s only native freshwater turtle. “The roughly 200 pond turtles left in the Santa Monicas eat and reproduce in water, and spend much of their lives hunkered down in chaparral and leaf litter,” Dagit said. “With fewer places for them to hide from predators like raccoons and ravens, we’re finding more and more pond turtles with their eyes pecked out and missing legs.

“We’ll have to wait and see how it all plays out,” Dagit said, shaking her head. “But I never thought I’d be witnessing the possible extinction of so many plants and animals in this area.”

The magnitude of the devastation hit home as researchers including Dagit and a small army of volunteers began studying the surveys of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area’s matrix of public and private lands.

The data, which also came from the catch basins of more than 46 traps baited with chemical lures to attract insect pests, indicated that the hardest-hit areas were riparian zones where trees help control the environment of the canyon bottoms, creek flows and ponds they overhang and surround.

The native trees of the Santa Monica Mountains adapted over thousands of years to prolonged dry periods. But aerial surveys using instruments designed to measure infrared radiation levels emitted by living and dead vegetation determined that the scale of the die-off was unprecedented in modern history, scientists said.

In addition, tree mortality rates were highest in areas that had the most number of days with temperatures exceeding 95 degrees, and the least number of days with rainfall.

Those conditions lowered water tables in canyon lands and deprived waterways — such as Topanga Creek and Malibu Creek in the southern part of the Santa Monica Mountains — of historic flows, said Natasha Stavros, an applied science systems engineer at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

“Good rains like we had last year will not be enough to recover many of the losses we've seen,” Stavros said. “That's because trees that have struggled through five years of drought depleted their natural defenses and resources, inviting fatal infestations of bugs and disease.”

Still, Dagit found reason for hope in a clump of willow saplings pushing up through the creek's muddy banks, about 30 feet from a water gauge installed in the 1930s that was left high and dry in 2011 by diminished flows.

“Fish need trees,” Dagit said.

Rain? There's very little on tap

From San Francisco to L.A., California stands to suffer an unusually dry winter.



CRAIG SWANSON of Victorville, Calif., is spending the Christmas holiday at Dockweiler State Beach with his family, including canines Penny, left, and Teddy. For downtown Los Angeles, this is shaping up to be the driest March-through-December period on record. (Christina House Los Angeles Times)

By Rong-Gong Lin II
LA Times 12/25/2017

SAN FRANCISCO — California's dimly dry autumn paints a bleak outlook for the state's rainy season, unless the weather this winter makes a big about-face.

The situation is a major turnaround from last year, when Northern California was battered by a series of "atmospheric river" storms that helped end the state's five-year drought. When it was over, California's northern Sierra Nevada experienced the wettest winter on record, with some ski resorts staying open through the summer.

The dry conditions are partly to blame for the worst fire season on record in California. Low humidity and lack of rain coupled with high winds fueled destructive wildfires from Mendocino down to San Diego this fall. In wine country, more than 40 people died and more than 10,000 homes were lost. To the south, the Thomas fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties became the largest wildfire on record in California.

If the trend continues, forecasters say California could see, come spring, a light Sierra Nevada snowpack, a key source of water for the state during the dry summer.

The weather station in California with the longest record of recording rainfall, San Francisco, has measured just 3.4 inches of rain since the start of July. That's only 44% of average for this time of year, said meteorologist Jan Null.

So far this December, San Francisco has received only 0.15 inches of rain.

San Francisco is already close to the halfway point in its rainy season: Jan. 19. In an average year, the city would have received 11.83 inches by then, halfway to the annual average of 23.65 inches, Null said.

Null said he analyzed rain records going back to the oldest precipitation record on file for California, the 1849-50 season in Gold Rush-era San Francisco. He found that there were 22 years in which San Francisco at this point in the season had similar anemic — but not abysmal — rainfall, between 2.9 inches and 3.9 inches.

And what Null found was bad news: Of those 22 years, only four of them caught up in the remainder of the rainy season and finished above the average.

“Those aren't very good odds,” Null said.

As in Southern California, San Francisco has also been struggling with a giant mass of high pressure that is deflecting storms away from California — a pattern that has remained consistent throughout December.

“How long this will continue, I don't think anyone knows,” Null said.

The situation is even more grim in Southern California.

On average, downtown L.A. gets more than an inch of rain in November and more than 2 in December. But this year, only one-hundredths of an inch of rain fell in November, and the same amount fell in December. In fact, there has been no substantial rainfall in downtown Los Angeles since February.

Since Oct. 1, downtown L.A. has seen only a measly 0.12 inches of rain.

It's part of a larger weather trend for Southern California: Over the last seven years, maximum temperatures during the fall have gotten hotter and there has been less rain.

This October and November were the hottest in 122 years of record keeping for the region.

For downtown Los Angeles, this is shaping up to be the driest March-through-December period on record, with a paltry 0.69 inches beating out the 1.24 inches that fell during the same 10-month period in 1962.

“We'd have to have a dramatic turnaround to have a wet winter,” said climatologist Bill Patzert of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in La Cañada Flintridge.

“It’s certainly not an auspicious start,” said UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain.

The longer that California sees the late fall and winter go by without seeing some decent storms, the worse the outlook is for a wet winter, much less an average one.

“Essentially in California, especially Southern California, we’re reliant on a pretty small number of precipitation events to ... bring most of the water,” Swain said. “And it’s easy to miss out on just a couple of events and have a dry year.”

And the outlook continues to be dry and mild, setting up a boring time for meteorologists in Southern California. The forecast for downtown L.A. between Christmas and New Year’s Eve calls for partly cloudy or sunny skies, with highs mostly in the 60s to 70s.

San Francisco is also not expected to see significant storms for the next week.

In contrast to Los Angeles, Northern California did have somewhat of a decent November, depending on your perspective. San Francisco received 2.83 inches of rain, close to the average November amount of 3.16 inches.

That resulted in snow in the Sierra Nevada, home to the state’s greatest mountain range that not only provides powder for ski resorts but stores California’s water supply as ice to be used during the dry season.

But unfortunately, the one major storm that did get through was relatively warm. So although precipitation in the Sierra is close to average, much of it is falling as rain in the lower elevations where snow would normally accumulate, said meteorologist Scott McGuire of the National Weather Service’s Reno office.

That means that the snowpack is pretty small; the amount of water contained in the snowpack is only about 34% of average for this time of year because snow is accumulating only at the highest elevations.

“The low elevations don’t have a big snowpack at all, they’re well below average for this time of year ... so the snowpack has suffered as a result,” McGuire said. “We’ve only had one major storm — it brought us an abundance of precipitation — but it wasn’t good for the snow cycle.”

If things don’t change soon, McGuire said, “we’ll start to worry about the low snowpack.”

A simple Christmas wish

Rose City, Texas, hit hard by Hurricane Harvey, would like nothing more than clean drinking water.



JANICE RATCLIFF runs the water plant in Rose City, where the state ordered residents to boil their water. (Molly Hennessy-Fiske Los Angeles Times)

By Molly Hennessy-Fiske
LA Times 12/24/2017

ROSE CITY, Texas — It was before dawn when the woman responsible for running this small town's water system got a frightening call: The water tower was running low.

Since Hurricane Harvey inundated this rural area 90 miles east of Houston with almost 10 feet of water in August, Janice Ratcliff has submitted drinking-water tests to the state, hoping to lift an order requiring nearly 600 residents to boil water. It would be a small step toward livability in Rose City, a town full of campers with Christmas trees set up outside.

She returned to her flooded office the week after the storm in waders, and kept the water plant operating manually, working seven days a week.

Before Thanksgiving, residents were among 3,750 people in southeast Texas without clean drinking water. The total was down to 1,150 people this week, state officials said. Rose City has supplied donated bottled water and hasn't charged for tap water since the boil order was issued.

Ratcliff had hoped new tests would get the order lifted in time for the holidays. Insurance red tape and failed state tests had delayed the process before. Now a glitch had kept the water tower from filling overnight and threatened to set back the city's plans.

At 5:15 a.m. Thursday, Ratcliff rushed to the tower above the town's water plant behind City Hall, all still being rebuilt after the storm and surrounded by a mix of mud and debris.

Ratcliff's own office had flooded, replaced by a wood shack without heat or air conditioning. To her relief, the tower still had enough water and pressure to avoid extending the order to boil water. She gathered water samples and sent them off to the state, hoping for good news in the next 24 hours.

The first one she hoped to call with the good news would be Mayor Bonnie Stephenson.

Stephenson lost her own home in the flood, and has stayed three places since, most recently with her son in his double-wide trailer. After four years as mayor, the former union secretary and real estate agent found herself unloading trucks of donated supplies, coordinating relief centers including a military tent and temporary laundromat still set up in front of City Hall. She's 72.

Some residents have received assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but many have not. FEMA is scheduled to hold a town hall meeting on Jan. 4.

"Hopefully we'll get some answers, or some help. I try my best, but sometimes it's not enough when you've lost everything and you have people telling you, 'What can I do?' and you can only say, 'Reapply,'" Stephenson said.

All but two of the 207 homes in Rose City were destroyed, she said. All across town, wood-frame homes sit vacant, broken windows dark and gaping, plastic toys salvaged from the flood lined up outside next to packed trash bags.

"People are watching their homes rot," the mayor said. "... It doesn't seem like Christmas to us."

There are no roses — the town was named after a nearby oilfield — but there are towering pines, the thick forest of east Texas mixed with the bayous of Louisiana,

whose border is less than 25 miles away. Some homes were built in the 1800s, and families have lived here for generations.

Across the street from City Hall, City Secretary Tonya Veazey set up her Christmas tree under a carport serving as her family's kitchen and den, with a couch, TV, smokers and a grill.

"I've had meltdown after meltdown. This past week has been the worst," she said.

Neighbors know where she lives and come to the fence line looking for help — with the water, drywall and other building materials they cannot afford. Husband C.J. Veazey, 40, trimmed brisket on a table nearby to sell during the holiday.

"Because people didn't have money for flood insurance, we're rebuilding penny by penny, paycheck by paycheck," said Tonya Veazey, 34, wearing a "Come Hell or High Water Texas Strong" T-shirt.

Volunteers came to help after the storm, including Los Angeles police and those who were flooded the year before outside Baton Rouge, La. Some volunteers remained at Rose City Baptist Church, where Veazey joined them Thursday sorting donated toys for children in town. The church was gutted, a tent of supplies and stained glass windows piled outside.

Up the road, Veazey had helped a couple get a donated camper to stay in while they elevated their house 10 feet. They didn't have flood insurance, and it has cost them \$16,000 so far just to raise the house.

Across the railroad tracks, an 86-year-old neighbor's daughter tried to persuade her to leave after the storm destroyed her house. When she refused to leave Rose City, the daughter returned from Dallas to help her rebuild.

Juanita Cardenas recalled how she and her five siblings slept on the floor with their parents growing up, with cardboard for insulation. Back then, east Texas was segregated, which meant only her mother, the lightest-skinned in the family, was allowed into local shops.

But instead of moving away, most children — including hers — bought or settled the land. "We survived," Cardenas said.

Her four-bedroom house was razed after the flood, and the site is now a sandy lot. She got help building a one-room shack behind it with a kitchenette that Cardenas showed off. She hopes to move in after New Year's.

"That's a mansion to me growing up!" she said, laughing.

The family lost three houses on its plot, where Cardenas' daughter also stays, and is still waiting for all of its FEMA assistance. They can't afford to rebuild, but hope to find a larger trailer.

"I'm just thankful we've got something to live in," said daughter Helen Ford, 59.

And on Friday morning, Ratcliff gave them something else to celebrate.

"Merry Christmas from the operators at the water plant in Rose City," she announced on Facebook — the order to boil water had finally been lifted.

ECO-TIP

Steps to prevent topsoil erosion

David Goldstein
Special to Ventura County Star USA TODAY NETWORK
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The ongoing drought and other recent events have stressed local landscapes, and recent warm and dry weather may make rains seem distant. But as House Stark says in “Game of Thrones,” winter is coming.

When rains hit weakened landscapes, the result is often erosion. If topsoil washes off your property and into storm drains, not only do you lose nutrients needed for gardening, but you also risk polluting natural habitat. Sediment-laden water flowing from storm drains into waterways can bind to fish gills, impairing the animal's ability to breathe. Murky water also blocks sunlight and inhibits the growth of plants necessary to sustain natural habitat. Runoff can also carry harmful metals, pesticides and fertilizers.

If you have recently lost established plants holding the soil of your landscape or if you have only weakened or damaged plants, you may consider several options to prevent your topsoil from washing down storm drains and polluting waterways.

Straw wattles are one of the simplest and least expensive immediate measures to prevent erosion. Wattles are long tubes full of straw, mulch chips or coir, which is coconut mixed with straw. Wattles are placed across a slope so they slow runoff, allowing water to flow through while holding back sediment.

Jason Stetler, a landscape architect with Scarlett’s Landscape, recommends aligning wattles at 15-foot intervals, like contour lines, depending on the angle and distance of a slope. Between rows, he often adds plants suitable for a Mediterranean climate.

Secure wattles into trenches a few inches deep, and use stakes on both sides to prevent them from washing away and clogging nearby storm drains. Jute and fiber blankets can provide similar protection on flatter areas, and sandbags can direct water away from erosion prone areas.

For longer-term plans, consider native vegetation such as woody shrubs and natural grasses to stabilize soil and filter pollutants. Permeable hardscape is also useful to slow, spread and sink water, rather than channeling rain into soil-robbing torrents.

Eco-Tip is written by David Goldstein, an environmental resource analyst for the Ventura County Public Works Agency. He can be reached at 658-4312 or david.goldstein@ventura.org.