

Firefighters Make Progress in California, as Evacuees Wait to Return

Three fires have displaced tens of thousands of people and burned more than 100,000 acres combined, but crews said the latest weather is offering some relief.

Published Sept. 12, 2024 Updated Sept. 13, 2024, 2:48 p.m. ET

See images from the fires



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Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



Here is the latest on the fires.

Firefighters continued to battle three major wildfires burning through the steep mountains and brushy canyons of Southern California on Thursday. Cooler and wetter weather aided their efforts, but the destructive blazes remained worrisome enough to keep tens of thousands of people from returning to their homes.

The three fires around Los Angeles, which together have charred 100,000 acres and destroyed dozens of homes, were among more than 65 large blazes burning across the United States on Thursday, mostly in the West. Amid a terribly hot summer, wildfires have torn through more than seven million acres of land nationwide this year. That's the most to have burned by early September since 2018.

Firefighters in Southern California on Thursday sounded more confident about their efforts, as the winds had quieted, humidity was up and temperatures had dropped. Those helpful conditions were expected to continue, if not further improve, next week.

Here's what we're covering:

- **The Bridge fire:** California's largest actively burning fire, at 51,000 acres, has destroyed dozens of homes in rural communities in the San Gabriel Mountains north of Los Angeles. The fire remained entirely uncontained as of Thursday afternoon, but crews said weather conditions were the best they've been for firefighting since the fire started on Sunday.
- **The Airport fire:** Stretching across Orange and Riverside Counties, the 23,000-acre fire grew rapidly on Monday and Tuesday, but firefighters said cooler temperatures and fog have helped them curb its growth over the past 24 hours. The fire is now 5 percent contained. Two civilians were injured in the blaze, including one who suffered burns, and 10 firefighters were treated for minor injuries.

- **The Line fire:** Officials in San Bernardino County on Thursday charged a 34-year-old man with nine felonies, including several counts of arson, accusing him of starting the Line fire last week in the San Bernardino Mountains. The fire was 18 percent contained as of Thursday afternoon. The suspect, Justin Halstenberg, is being held at a county jail and will be arraigned on Friday. Officials said he worked as a contract delivery driver for FedEx.
- **In Oregon:** Rain has given firefighters significant relief in battling the Rail Ridge fire, which has destroyed a handful of homes in a rural part of central Oregon and burned more than 160,000 acres. Last month, the state surpassed its longstanding record for acres burned in a year.
- **In Idaho:** Showers have also helped crews work toward containing the Lava fire, a major fire in the Boise National Forest that merged with another this week. The combined blaze, about 40 miles north of Idaho's capital city, has now burned more than 94,000 acres. The same conditions have improved the outlook in battling the Wapiti fire, a separate fire in the same forest that has grown to more than 125,000 acres.

Reporting was contributed by Jill Cowan in Los Angeles, Vik Jolly in Lake Elsinore, Calif., and Rachel Parsons in Victorville, Calif.

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Sept. 13, 2024
Adeel Hassan



Barely escaping: Video captures a woman staggering through wind and flame.



The El Cariso Village area in California on Thursday after the Airport fire swept through. Mark Abramson for The New York Times

Like an apparition, a woman appears out of an inferno, flames swirling, her hair and dress whipped in searing wind, bright embers skidding along the roadway under her feet. For a moment, it seems impossible that she will survive.

But then the brief video, which splashed across social media after being captured on Tuesday, records her salvation: a vehicle flashing emergency lights and veering toward her, a last-second chance of escape. The video ends as she reaches the door.

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Sept. 12, 2024

Vik Jolly Reporting from El Cariso Village, Calif.



Amid several burned properties, a market survives.




Noelle Hafey, who owns Hafey Farms Mountain Market in El Cariso Village, hopes to turn the market into a hub for the community, especially for people who lost homes. Vik Jolly for The New York Times

When the Airport fire swept through the El Cariso Village community in the Santa Ana Mountains southeast of Los Angeles this week, flames charred large swaths of the area, gutted automobiles and turned several homes into rubble, leaving behind a smoldering landscape.

But the Hafey Farms Mountain Market survived. The fire, which devoured several other properties as it leaped from Orange County into Riverside County, lapped the parking lot of the store, torched the store's trailer and turned part of the fence around the lot into cinder, leaving a string of lights looking like burned pine cones. But the market itself remained intact.

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 Sept. 12, 2024
Mark Abramson



Mazen Sheikly and his friend Wendy Greenberg surveyed what was left of his property on Thursday after it was burned down by the Airport fire in Lake Elsinore, Calif.



Sept. 12, 2024

Rachel Parsons Reporting from Victorville, Calif.



Is my house still there? Are my relatives safe? Fire evacuees worry, and wonder what comes next.



Jerry Houston, 49, and Knight in the parking lot of a Red Cross shelter in Victorville, Calif. He fled the Big Bear Lake area days ago. "I've got two stepsons up there still," he said. Rachel Parsons

At a vast shelter in Victorville, Calif., the heat was oppressive and anxiety was in the air.

The shelter, one of seven set up by the American Red Cross for people affected by major fires in Southern California, had about 50 cots set up in rows and many more ready to be deployed. Dozens of people sat down at long tables nearby for lunch on Thursday, and information tables for services they might need were arrayed along the walls.

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Sept. 12, 2024

Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



Arson charges were filed in the Line fire, which has displaced thousands of people.

An emergency vehicle driving past Highway 330 while the Line Fire approaches on Saturday. Eric Thayer/Associated Press

Southern California authorities on Thursday filed charges against a man suspected of igniting a major wildfire that has ballooned to 37,000 acres, caused millions of dollars in damage and displaced tens of thousands of people from their homes for days.

The San Bernardino County District Attorney's Office charged the man, Justin Halstenberg, 34, with nine felonies, including several counts of arson, related to the blaze, the Line fire. The wildfire broke out last week in the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains and quickly spread amid extremely hot and dry weather.

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Sept. 12, 2024

Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



Cooler, more humid weather is giving California crews the upper hand against three major fires.


The landscape of the area around El Cariso Village in Lake Elsinore, Calif., on Thursday after the Airport fire swept through. Mark Abramson for The New York Times

After days of fire behavior that officials described as extreme and erratic, Southern California firefighters on Thursday said they were able to gain ground on major wildfires as weather conditions shifted in their favor.

Cooler temperatures — in the 80s instead of the 110s, as they were during a heat wave last week — and higher humidity levels on Thursday aided firefighting efforts against three major wildfires in the region that have burned down dozens of homes this week. Gusty winds had also died down.

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 **Sept. 12, 2024**
Jill Cowan



Rain delivers significant relief to firefighters in Oregon and Idaho.

The Rail Ridge fire burned more than 161,000 acres in the Ochoco National Forest area in Oregon and is 12 percent contained. The New York Times

Rainfall in Oregon and Idaho has delivered significant relief for firefighters battling major blazes that have consumed grasslands and forests and threatened mountain communities.


“It put a good damper on things,” said Kaleena Lynde, a spokeswoman for the Rail Ridge fire response, referring to the fire that has burned more than 161,000 acres in the Ochoco National Forest area in Oregon and is 12 percent contained. “It’s a lot of mop-up right now.”

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 **Sept. 12, 2024**
Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



A 34-year-old man was charged on Thursday with nine felonies, including several counts of arson, in connection with the Line fire in the San Bernardino Mountains.

 **Sept. 12, 2024, 5:12 p.m. ET**
Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



The National Weather Service's San Diego office — which forecasts for San Bernardino, Orange and Riverside Counties, where the three big California fires are burning — say some surprising weather may be on the way: rain. A strong low-pressure system moving in Monday could bring unseasonably low temperatures as well as precipitation.

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Sept. 12, 2024, 4:19 p.m. ET

Vik Jolly Reporting from the Southern California wildfires



Residents describe harrowing escapes as fire consumed nearby homes.

The remains of Joe McLean's house in the community of El Cariso Village. Vik Jolly for The New York Times

Joe McLean has lived in a two-bedroom home in a rural hillside neighborhood in Southern California for his entire life, and in that time he has seen plenty of fires. Every time, they blew by. Someone else's house was taken.

This time was different.

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**Sept. 12, 2024, 4:16 p.m. ET**

Rachel Parsons Reporting from Victorville, Calif.



Roommates Tammy Ann Smith, 59, and Tammi Wormsbecker, 50, were ordered to leave their Big Bear Lake home on Tuesday because of the Line fire. They don't know the fate of their home. "Some friends came down from Big Bear and said our house burned down, but the fire guy here said it hadn't," Smith said, referring to a fire department official at a shelter in Victorville, Calif.

**Sept. 12, 2024, 4:16 p.m. ET**

Rachel Parsons Reporting from Victorville, Calif.

The friends have spent two nights sleeping in Smith's car in the parking lot because her dog, Tsar, couldn't go inside the shelter unless he stayed in a crate. "It's hot," Smith said, sitting in her car, doors open and her dog at her feet. "But it's so depressing inside."

**Sept. 12, 2024, 3:46 p.m. ET**

Vik Jolly Reporting from the Southern California wildfires



The wildfires and poor air quality have forced the cancellation of dozens of local blood drives, LifeStream told donors in an email. The San Bernardino-based blood products nonprofit said there was a blood shortage emergency and urged donors to give blood. "Our shelves are critically low," the email said.

Philip Cheung for The New York Times

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Sept. 12, 2024, 3:29 p.m. ET
Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



Earlier this week, the biggest concern of firefighters was that the Line fire would push northeast into the populated resort communities around Big Bear Lake. The fire burned about 800 acres yesterday in that area, but firefighters said on Thursday they were confident they could prevent the fire from reaching Big Bear homes.



Sept. 12, 2024, 3:29 p.m. ET
Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco

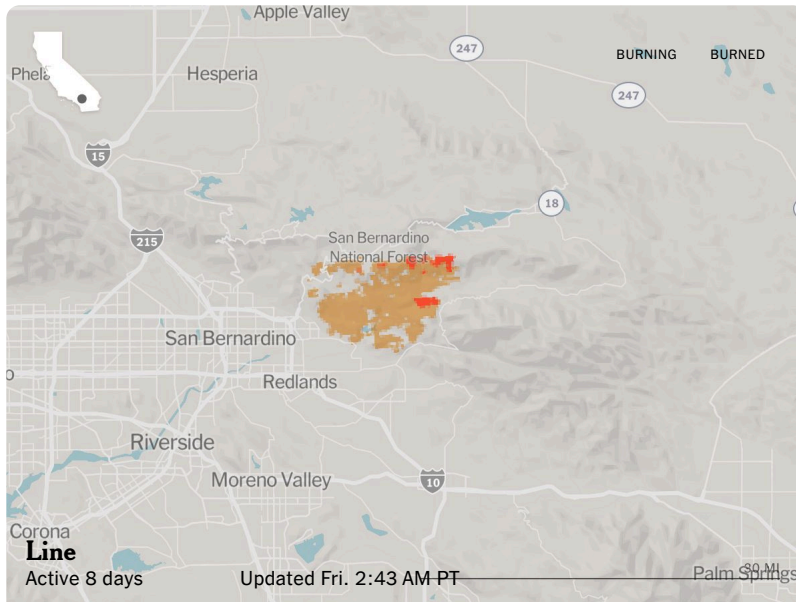
“That Big Bear area looks really good,” the Cal Fire operations section chief Jeremy Pierce said in an update on Thursday.



Sept. 12, 2024, 3:20 p.m. ET
Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



Jeremy Pierce, a Cal Fire operations section chief, said that fire crews have controlled the part of the Line fire that was threatening homes in Highland, where about 56,000 people live. Pierce said fire crews are now focused on preventing the Line fire from spreading to Lake Arrowhead.



38,000 acres
21% contained
+400 acres/past day

Track all the major fires here ›
By The New York Times
Base map from Mapbox and OpenStreetMap



Sept. 12, 2024, 2:26 p.m. ET
Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



California has gotten a lot of rain over the past two years. But that rain has had an outsized impact in typically dry Southern California. It fueled unusually high amounts of vegetation growth in the southern half of the state.



Sept. 12, 2024, 2:26 p.m. ET

Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco

All that vegetation has turned to tinder after a warm summer and brutal heat wave this month. “If the same heat wave would have occurred in a September following two very dry years, it is very likely that there would not be much fire as a result,” said Park Williams, a hydroclimatologist at U.C.L.A.

Philip Cheung for The New York Times



Sept. 12, 2024, 2:04 p.m. ET

Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



The much-awaited cooler temperatures seem to have arrived. Places that had been over 110 are in the 80s now. The high is 86 degrees in San Bernardino and 81 in Los Angeles.

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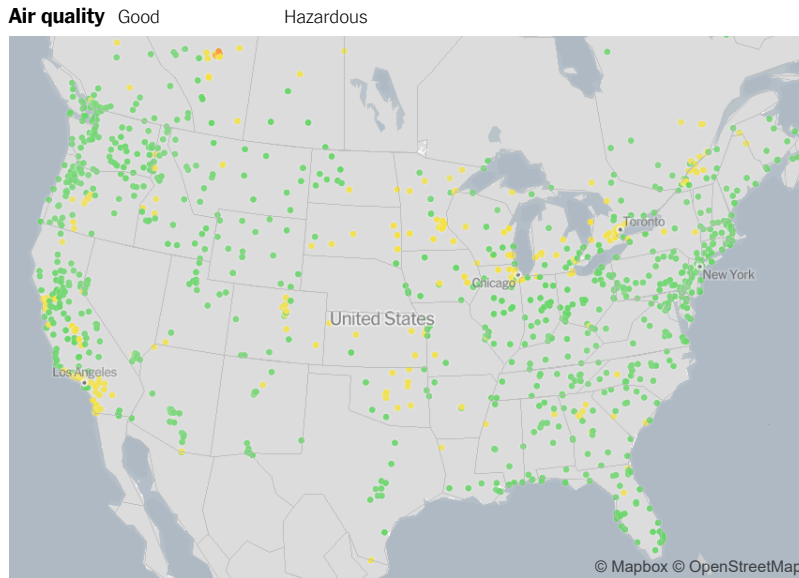


Sept. 12, 2024, 1:49 p.m. ET

Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



Air quality is looking pretty good across most of Southern California today, with the exception of places that are in evacuation zones as well as the city of Yucaipa, which is just south of where the Line fire is burning.



Source: AirNow • Note: Data is as of 4 p.m. Eastern on Sept. 13, 2024



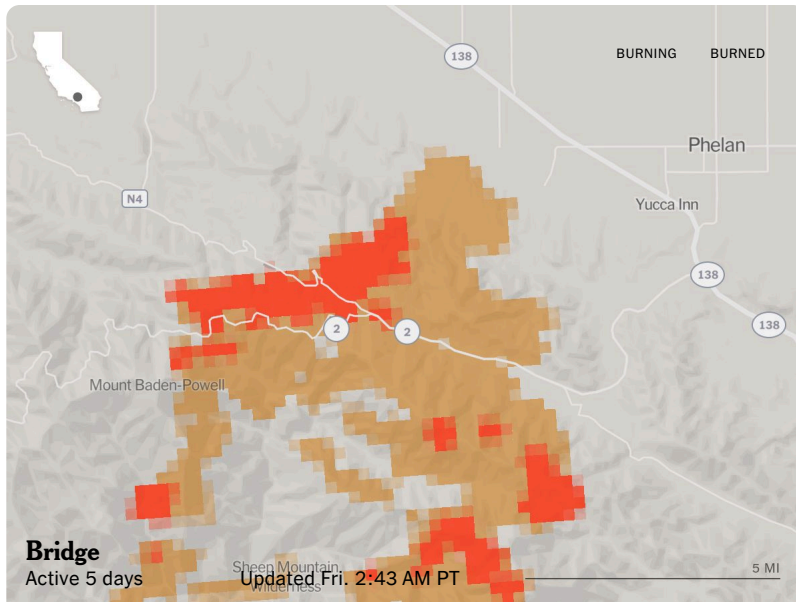
Sept. 12, 2024, 1:29 p.m. ET

Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



Fire crews working on the Bridge fire, in the San Gabriel Mountains northeast of Los Angeles, said Thursday that they’ve gained ground against the blaze, which has been threatening homes in Wrightwood, San Antonio Hills and Upland. “Things are going really well. Yesterday, we had very favorable conditions,” said Spencer Andreis with Cal Fire.

Philip Cheung for The New York Times



Bridge
Active 5 days

52,000 acres
3% contained
+830 acres/past day

Track all the major fires here >
By The New York Times
Base map from Mapbox and OpenStreetMap



Sept. 12, 2024, 1:19 p.m. ET
Judson Jones A reporter and a meteorologist



Forecasters out of the Los Angeles area were optimistic, saying that after this morning's breezier conditions, the weather would finally settle into a fairly benign pattern for the rest of the week. The red flag warnings and wind advisories in the area were on track to expire this morning.



Sept. 12, 2024, 1:01 p.m. ET
Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



Gov. Gavin Newsom last night declared a state of emergency for Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange and Riverside counties because of the Airport and Bridge fires. Earlier this week he had done so for the Line fire, too.

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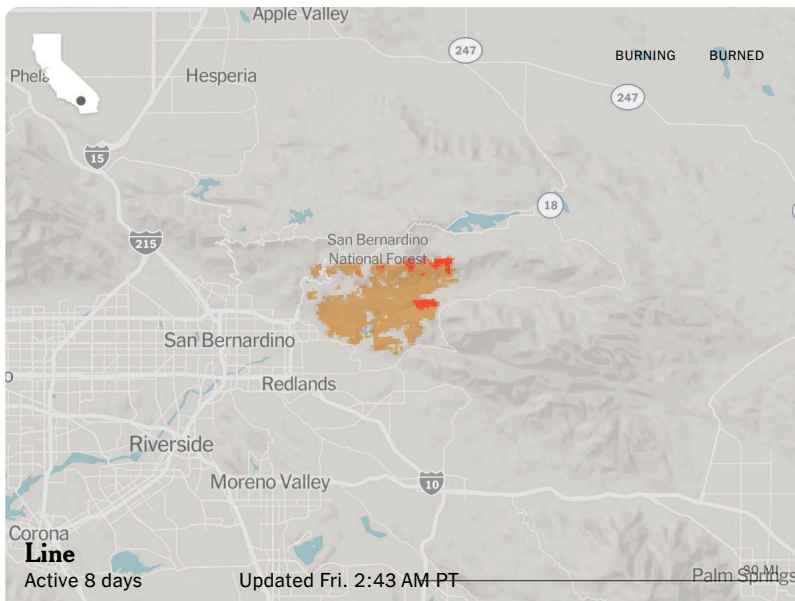


Sept. 12, 2024, 12:55 p.m. ET

Soumya Karlamangla Reporting from San Francisco



The Line fire, which has burned 32,000 acres in the San Bernardino Mountains, is 18 percent contained. Fire crews said in their Thursday morning update that they expect cooler weather today to moderate the fire’s growth, but the fire will likely continue to spread in some harder-to-reach areas.



38,000 acres
 21% contained
 +400 acres/past day

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