

# California drought could spark 'out of bounds' wildfires, officials warn

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A firefighting plane makes a water drop on a wildfire that's burning in the hills just north of the San Gabriel Valley community of Glendora, Calif., on Thursday, Jan 16, 2014. (Nick Ut/AP Photo)

California is facing wildfires “outside of any normal bounds” as a historic drought turns drying brush and trees into a perfect tinderbox, officials have warned. The state recorded 665 wildfires from 1 January, about triple the average of 225 for this time of year, according to figures compiled by [Cal Fire](#), the state's department of forestry and fire protection.

Each day without heavy rain deepens the risks of a catastrophic fire season, and makes it hard to deal with more wildfires if and when they break out, officials said. .

“This is going to be a fire season outside of any normal bounds,” John Laird, the secretary for natural resources, told the Guardian. “Anything could happen at any time.”

Although the wildfire season does not officially start until May in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, locals are adjusting to life on a year-round frontline.

“This is the first time it really hit home that we have this danger,” said Annette Lambert, who lives with her husband and two young children in on top of a thickly wooded slope with spectacular canyon views. More than 200 communities across the state, including those overlooking Auburn, were designated fire-risk zones in the drought.

The Lambert family knew they were entering a potentially dangerous area 10 years ago when they built on land covered by oak, pine, and evergreen manzanita shrubs.

The neighbourhood, called Meadow Vista, meanders along the hilltops along a road too narrow for a conventional fire engine. Most of the homes are surrounded by trees and manzanitas; keep chicken coops or horses. Some of the houses were situated in such a way as to channel fire to straight up to the back door, according to fire inspectors.

“We got it from the shape of the land that fire could course right up the hill and was going to be an issue for us, and a risk that we would have to deal with,” said Lambert. “But we loved the trees.”

They had trouble finding home owners' insurance because the house lies more than a mile from the nearest fire hydrant.

In 2009, the Lamberts were ordered to evacuate, after a wildfire raged through a nearby subdivision, destroying more than 60 homes. The fire ranks as was the worst in a decade in the Sacramento area.”That was the first real scare,” Lambert said.

Learning the state fire agency had designated their neighbourhood in Meadow Vista as a high-risk area, because of the drought and a thick brush cover that could easily catch fire from a stray spark, brought those fears to life.”It does make you see the area differently. “We have this heavily wooded area. It is very beautiful, but it is also very dangerous when we have these dry conditions,” she said. “From the beginning of winter, when the rains didn't come and we would get all this information about how low the reservoir in Fulsom Lake was, you start getting this steadily burning dread about what could happen.”The Obama administration announced on Monday that it would set aside disaster funds for mega-fires across the western states which, like California, are experiencing drought. But local officials told reporters that when it comes to fire risks California is now in a class of its own. It is as dry in the foothills and in southern California as a typical July – the height of the fire season.

Many of the 665 fires recorded up to March 8 were unusually big, roaring through up to 100 acres a time. Some 7,200 acres were destroyed this year, compared with 4,900 acres last year, and 2013 already ranked as a bad year for fire.

Even before this year's drought, forest officials were reporting a longer fire season, and more catastrophic mega-fires, in California and in other western states. Half of the worst fires in recorded California history have occurred since 2002.

Climate change and land-use patterns are adding fuel to those fires. Higher temperatures and recurring and intensifying droughts are drying out landscapes. Pest invasions, such as the pine bark beetle, were killing off stands of trees.

California's state fire chief, Ken Pimlott, said: "We can't recall when we have seen this level of fire activity early in this year. This is usually the time of year when much of the state is greening up."

"We haven't even got into the months that historically are the worst in California – late August, September and October – so that's a big red flag right there."

The agency is already sending inspectors door-to-door, two months earlier than in a typical year, asking home owners to cut back branches on trees within 30ft of their homes, and sweep up dead leaves and other debris that could feed a fire.

In these drought conditions, overgrown shrubs, even a tree stump embedded in soil poses a potential risk, said inspector Jordan Smith. So do dead leaves left to gather by the side of a house, even the upholstery of deck chairs, left out on the porch.

Sometimes it's the location. "If a fire is going to start at the bottom and you had the right conditions, a fire could run right up here in a matter of minutes," Smith said peering down hill from one of the houses on this route.

The agency is also working to stockpile water for fighting fires. Fire crews typically rely on helicopters scooping up 300-400 gallon buckets of water from ponds and streams to put out flames. But many of those have already dried up because of the drought, and officials say crews may have to fly longer in search of water.

The state fire agency for years had worked to put out nearly all fires, about 95 percent, before they spread beyond 10 acres. That goal may now have to slip, Pimlott acknowledged.

"As conditions dry out and fire conditions become more extreme that goal can be challenging," said Pimlott. Crews may just encounter too many fires at once. But the agency hopes that stockpiling water and protecting homes would give fire crew a head start.

"We are always going to have the guys out there on helicopters and we are going to have crews with chain saws, but we have to give them a fighting chance," Pimlott said.