

Storm hammers Southern California but spares Valley from major problems



Lena Stevenson slips on the wet pavement but recovers before falling as she walks to her writing final at Fresno City College Tuesday morning, Dec. 2, 2014. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

Heavy rain from a powerful Pacific storm swept through parched California on Tuesday, providing some relief from a three-year drought but prompting evacuations in wildfire-scarred communities threatened by mudslides and flooding.

The rain began falling overnight Monday in Northern California, but the heaviest downpours were in Southern California, where recent burns have denuded slopes of the vegetation that helps hold soil in place. Traffic was snarled, and some flights at Los Angeles and San Francisco airports were delayed.

The National Weather Service said up to 6 inches of rain was possible in parts of Southern California by the time the storm ends Wednesday.

In the central San Joaquin Valley region, the storm proved to be far less threatening. Just 0.42 inches of rain fell in Fresno through 4 p.m. Tuesday, the National Weather Service said, and no problems with flooding or mudslides were reported, despite concerns that recent wildfires, including the massive Rim fire that burned 400 square miles within and around Yosemite National Park, could send sodden hillsides sliding.

The rain did contribute to a number of vehicle spinouts and crashes along Valley highways Tuesday morning, but the California Highway Patrol reported no major injuries.

Forecasters initially expected the storm to drop up to 1.26 inches of rain on Fresno before it moved east later this week. But Jim Bagnall with the National Weather Service in Hanford said only another one- or two-tenths of an inch of rain is expected through Wednesday before the storm peters out with lingering showers on Thursday.

Whereas the storm produced widespread, steady rain on Tuesday, Bagnall said Wednesday could include more off-and-on heavy spot rains and a chance of thunderstorms. After the storm clears out, he said, there is a good chance that fog will settle into the Valley.

The storm was expected to bring some snow to the Sierra Nevada, but the snow level was forecast to remain above 8,000 feet.

“That’s somewhat of a bad thing,” weather service forecaster Carlos Molina said. “The storm is coming down as rain, so it’s not collecting up in the mountains like it should be at this point. The more snowpack can accumulate, the better you are for filling the reservoirs and having that precipitation for later use.”

The upside: “In the short term, it’s beneficial because we are actually getting the rain we need,” Molina said. “In terms of just moistening Central California, it’s really helping us out.”

The storm was less forgiving in Southern California. In Camarillo Springs, about 50 miles northwest of Los Angeles, gushing water and muddy debris began pouring from adjacent hillsides before noon Tuesday, prompting the mandatory evacuation of about 75 homes. A mudslide in the same Ventura County community on Halloween buried one home in mud 3 feet deep, the result of a wildfire that burned the area more than a year ago.

Residents huddled at a nearby church as they waited to learn the fate of their homes and bemoaned a string of bad luck that began with the 2013 blaze.

“It’ll be the locusts next,” evacuee Rose Martin told the Ventura County Star. “It’s that mountain. You never know what it’s going to do.”

In Orange County, roughly 100 miles to the southeast, about 60 homes in rural Silverado Canyon were under a voluntary evacuation notice. The area burned over the summer and has been the site of previous mudslides, including one that killed a girl in 2005 and another in 1969 that killed six people who sought shelter in the fire station.

Residents worked together to evacuate large animals, and those who chose not to evacuate were gathering in the tiny town’s lone cafe to wait out the rain and keep warm.

“We have to take this seriously because we don’t know what’s going to happen,” longtime resident Connie Nelson said. “We’ll just deal with it as it comes. We take care of people up here.”

Three years of devastating drought has left the Sierra Nevada snowpack — which accounts for most of the state’s water supply — at just 24% of normal for this time of year. Fresno had less than half of its yearly average through June.

It would take many more storms like Tuesday’s for the state to make up the balance and pull out of the drought.

Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency in January and called on residents to reduce water use by 20%. As the storm blew in, new state data was released showing Californians aren’t meeting his goal: Statewide water usage was down just 6.7% in October.

In communities rebounding from recent wildfires, however, the most immediate concern wasn’t drought, but mud. In the foothill city of Glendora, northeast of Los Angeles, residents packed sandbags along their property lines and lined the streets with concrete barriers to keep mudflows out.

Los Angeles County Fire Department Acting Chief Steve Martin warned residents to heed any evacuation orders that

are issued, noting that a mild rain two weeks ago caused mudflows that damaged four homes.

“We know it’s an inconvenience. We know it’s hard to leave your homes behind,” Martin said. “But the fact of the matter is, when the mountain does cut loose, it happens so fast you’re already behind ... and it’s going to be very difficult to get to you.”

In Northern California, officials have been scrambling to control erosion following the King fire, which burned 153 square miles in the mountains east of Sacramento last summer, as well as the Rim fire, which burned more than 400 square miles in and around Yosemite National Park a year ago.

Neither area reported problems from the latest storm.

Staff writers Carmen George, Andrea Castillo and Tomas Kassahun and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

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