

Record-setting rainless January sparks fears, fire

By Kurtis Alexander and Evan Sernoffsky

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Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

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About 90 homes were evacuated when a six-alarm brushfire burned toward Pacifica's Rockaway Beach area.

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Dressed in grizzly bear garb, Cicero Goncalves looks to be well prepared for snowy weather as he waits in New York's Penn Station for a train to Vermont, Sunday, Jan. 26, 2015. Goncalves was headed north for some snowboarding, and was traveling by train because he expected the flight he had hoped to take would be canceled due to a storm that could dump 2 to 3 feet of snow from starting Monday. Goncalves, a 34-year-old flight attendant from Queens, counted himself and his travel partner as lucky. "We'll get there before it snows, and we're coming back when the storm is over, on Thursday," he said. A blizzard warning was issued for New York and Boston, and the National Weather Service said the massive storm would bring heavy snow and powerful winds starting Monday and

into Tuesday. (AP Photo/Verena Dobnik)

It was an astonishing scene in the heart of winter — dozens of Pacifica residents rushing to grab whatever household valuables they could as flames raced down a coastal bluff toward their homes.

Firefighters halted the blaze early Monday before it could do serious damage, but the evacuations punctuated a January that is poised to go down as the driest in California history, giving rise to summerlike conditions — including the threat of wildfire — even as the Northeast is hit with a paralyzing blast of snow.

The extremes on both sides of the country are connected, weather experts said Monday, by a mass of high pressure over the Pacific Ocean. The wall of air is diverting storms from the West Coast to the north, and eventually to the East Coast, much like what happened over the past three winters, pushing California deep into drought.

“It’s like your stomach is cringing, and you’re going, ‘Is this really happening?’” said Pacifica resident [Gina Cox](#), who was shocked Monday to find grasslands burning behind her town house well before dawn. “We’re more ready for a tsunami than we are for a wildfire.”

Dozens evacuated

She and her husband, Kevin, were alongside nearly 90 other households in the Rockaway Beach area that were evacuated shortly after 3:30 a.m., grabbing their three-legged toy fox terrier, Missy, as well as five days’ worth of clothes, and tax statements. Firefighters stamped out the blaze over the next few hours, but officials warned of “tinder-dry” conditions along the coast.

That’s because some communities, including San Francisco, have seen zero rainfall in January. If the dry streak continues, it would be the city’s first completely dry January since record-keeping began in 1849.

San Jose, meanwhile, has seen a scant 0.02 inches of rain this month and Sacramento has gotten 0.01 inches. While forecasters are calling for a 20 to 30 percent chance of light showers Tuesday, odds remain that Northern California’s three biggest cities will set records for the month.

Cutting water use

Historically, January is one of the three wettest months, when the state counts on its water supplies to recharge. But after three years of drought, rivers and reservoirs are at historic lows across California. Gov. [Jerry Brown](#) has asked Californians to voluntarily reduce water use by 20 percent, while some communities have mandated cuts.

[Stanford University](#) doctoral candidate [Daniel Swain](#), who famously dubbed the drought-inducing high-pressure system off the West Coast the “ridiculously resilient ridge,” said Monday that there’s little sign of the ridge weakening and allowing wet weather to move in soon.

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“The first part of February still looks pretty dry,” Swain said.

The high-pressure system — which Swain has likened to a boulder in a river, but one that deflects not water but currents in the atmosphere — is not uncommon historically. It’s the system’s persistence that is extraordinary and has made it the subject of debate, with scientists linking it to changing ocean conditions but disagreeing about whether it’s the result of human-caused global warming or natural variability.

The ridge last year also resulted in a bone-dry January in California, including San Francisco’s record low of 0.06 inches of rain. That marked the 13th January in the past 165 years in which the city got less than an inch of rain, according to data compiled by [Golden Gate Weather Services](#). The average over the past 30 years is 4.6 inches.

Frighteningly, more than half of the Januaries in which San Francisco saw less than an inch of rain came in the past three decades, with four in the past eight years — a statistic that climate experts are watching closely to figure out whether a drying pattern could be emerging. Consensus is that more extreme weather comes as the planet warms.

Monday was certainly extreme. Just miles from where Pacifica residents returned to their homes after the fire was contained, travelers were dealing with more than 50 flight cancellations at [San Francisco International Airport](#).

On the East Coast, more than 35 million people were hunkering down late Monday for a blizzard expected to drop 1 to 3 feet of snow from Boston to Philadelphia. Thousands of flights were canceled, government offices closed and schools let out early.

The storm, which is coming from the west just as California weather normally does, was coupling cold air from northern Canada with moist air on the Atlantic coast, resulting in heavy snow.

Conditions linked

“Everything around the globe is connected,” said [Jan Null](#), the meteorologist at Golden Gate Weather Services.

Temperatures in the Bay Area on Monday, meanwhile, approached 70 degrees.

The good news in California is that heavy rainfall in the first two weeks of December means the state is posting above-average precipitation for the wet season, which began Oct. 1. However, Null said, that’s not enough rain to make a dent in the drought.

“It’s great to pay off this month’s credit card,” he said. “But if you have a lingering balance, you eventually got to pay that off, too.”

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