Met Office

Deeper discovery

Case Study

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What are wildfires?

A case study of the 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires

Los Angeles is a city in the south west of the state of California, located on the west coast of the United States of America (Figure 1). The city itself has a population of around 4 million people and the wider metropolitan area is home to more than 12 million people.

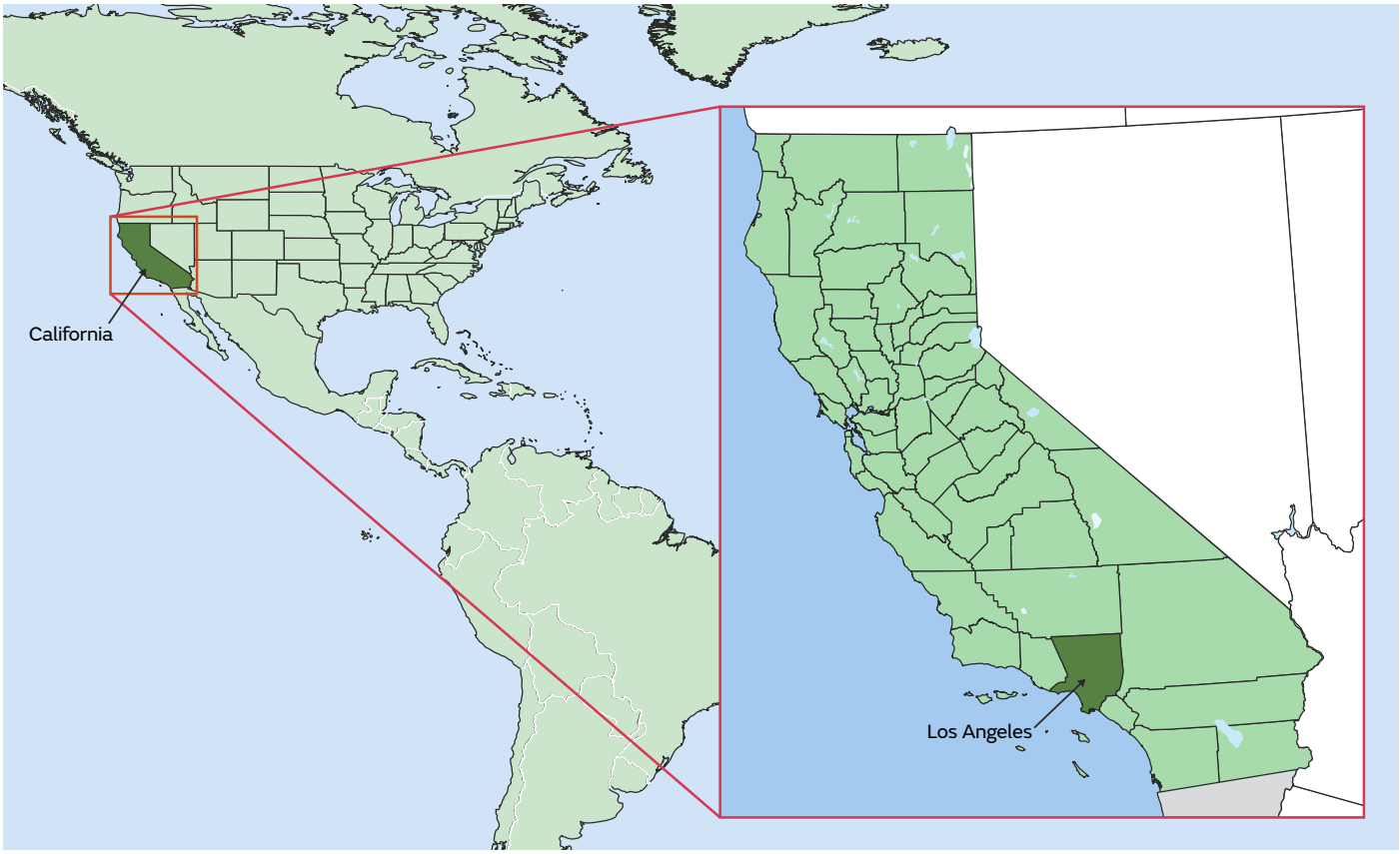


Figure 1. Location map.

Vegetation

The dominant vegetation type in Southern California is called “chaparral,” a type of shrubland that thrives in a Mediterranean climate, characterised by hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters (Figure 2). Chaparral is adapted to fire and naturally experiences fire every 30 to 150 years (California Chaparral, 2025). However, chaparral has not evolved to handle frequent burning. The increased frequency and number of wildfires in the region can lead to a switch to grass, as there is not enough time between fires for the shrubs to regenerate (Syphard et al., 2019). This conversion from shrubs to grasses may also increase the risk of fires, as grasses are highly resilient to frequent fires, fast growth and ability to quickly re-establish after a fire, and are very flammable, resulting in a cycle of repeating fires. This is what scientists refer to as a positive feedback cycle (Keeley et al., 2012).

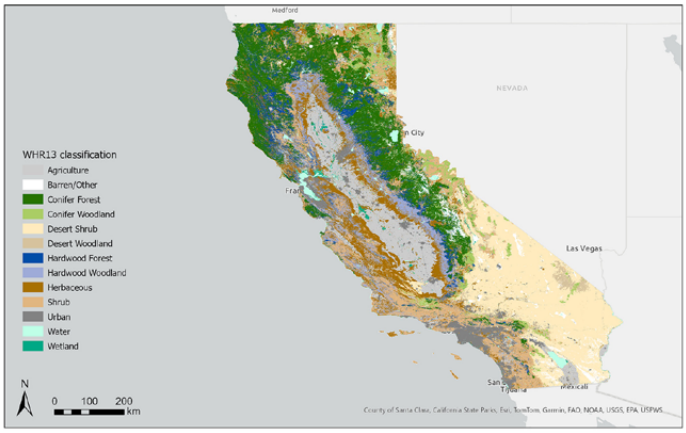


Figure 2a. Chaparral (a type of shrubland) Vegetation and 2b. a map showing the main types of vegetation in California.

Date, time, and development of 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires

Between January 7 and January 31, 2025, a series of 14 wildfires occurred in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The first is thought to have begun in Palisades around 10:30 am local time (Pacific Time Zone) on the 7th January 2025, which then spread rapidly, ultimately burning more than 9,500 ha (13,000 football pitches). Within hours, multiple fires ignited across the region, escalating into a large-scale disaster (Figure 3).

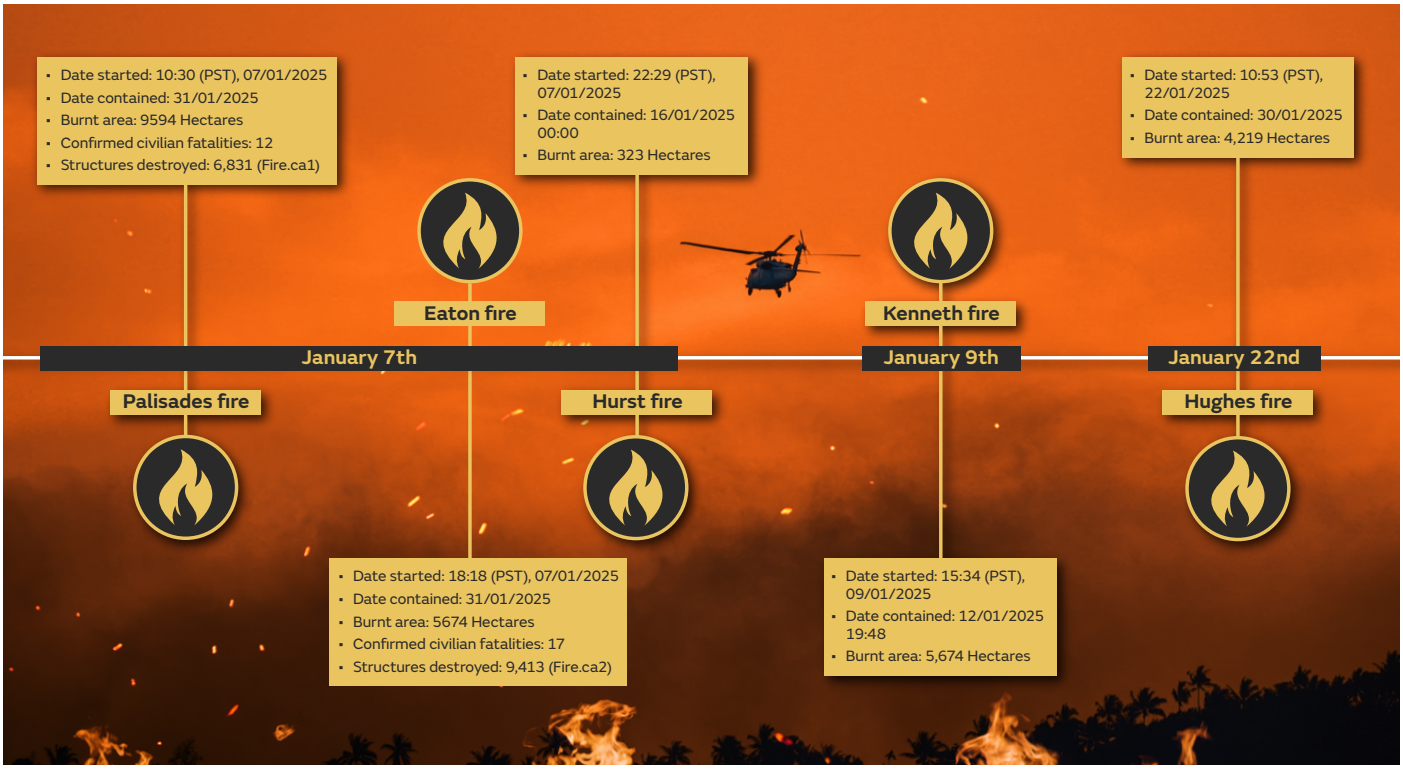


Figure 3a. Timeline of the most five most destructive wildfires.

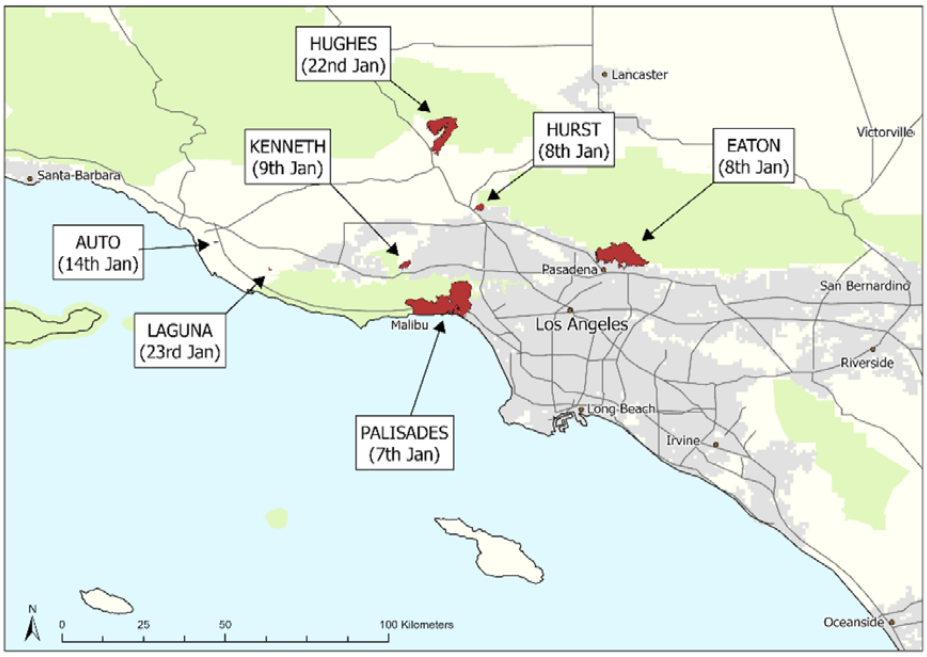


Figure 3b. a map showing the location of the main fires in LA.

Causes of the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires

Most wildfires globally are started by people. For the USA, nearly 85% of wildfires are attributed to a human ignition source (Short, 2017). These fires can be caused by campfires and BBQs that are not properly put out, faulty equipment, and even deliberate acts of arson. While lightning is also a common cause of wildfires in the USA, as no lightning was reported in the area in 2025 investigators of the Los Angeles wildfires quickly ruled out lightening as the cause (Dearen, 2025). There was also no conclusive evidence indicating that either arson or faulty power lines were the cause.

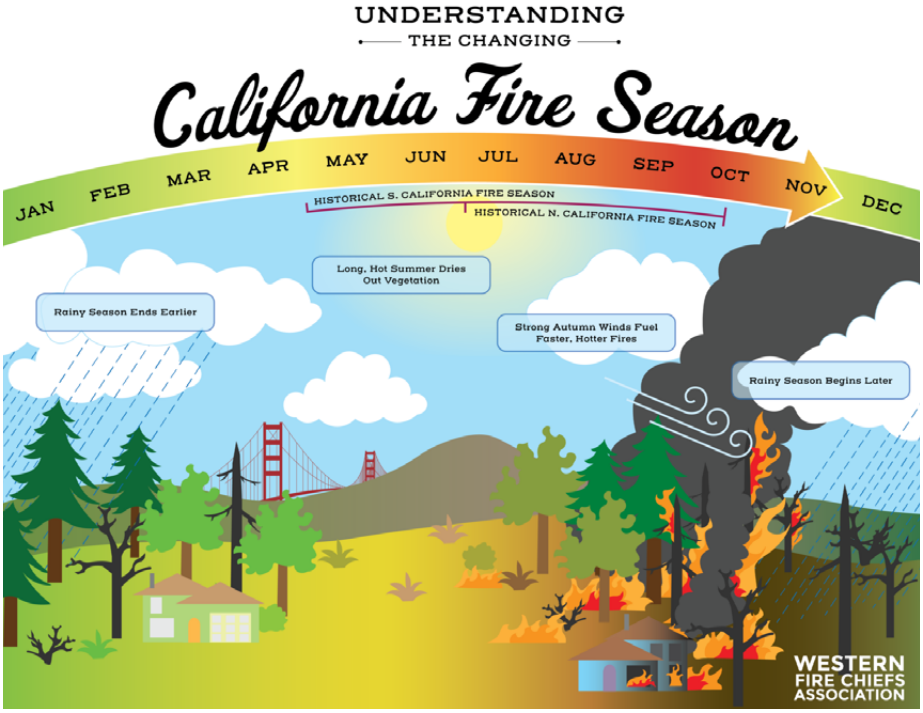


Figure 4. Fire Season in California (Western Fire Chiefs Association, 2025).

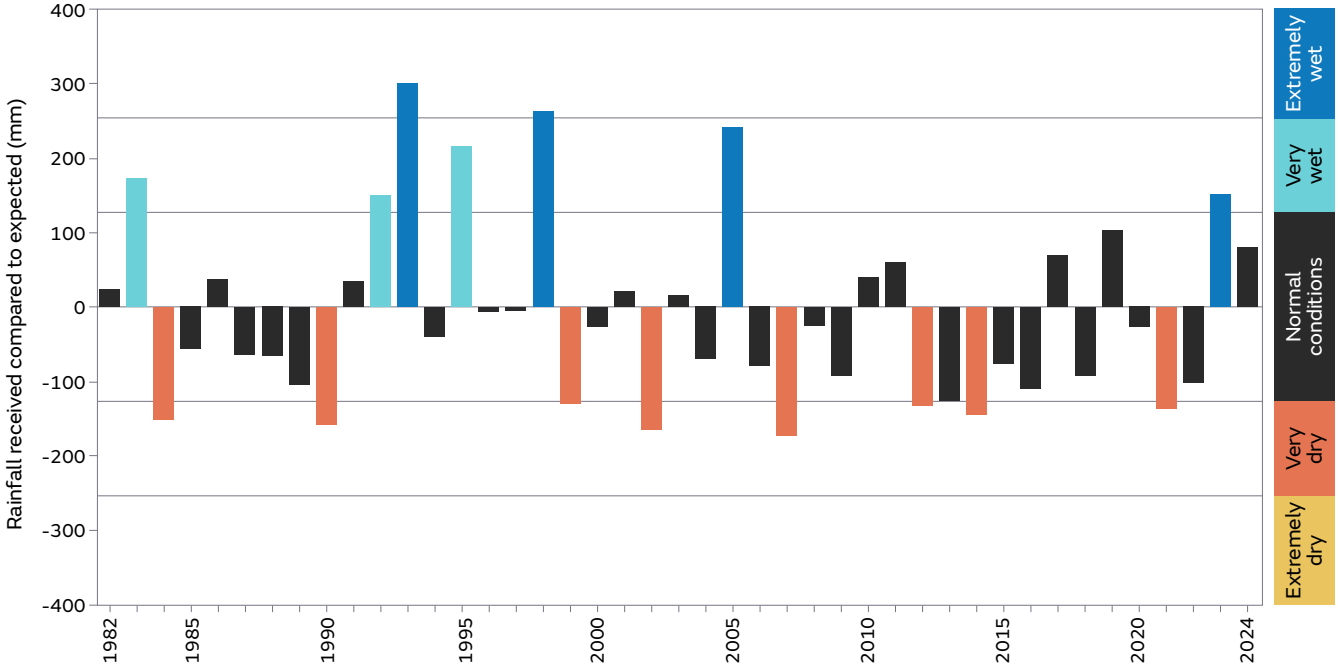
The role of the weather for wildfire activity in California

The wildfire season in California typically begins in June and continues until October (Figure 4). During this time the weather conditions are hot and dry which are favourable for fire ignition. Scientists often refer to the combination of weather conditions that increase the risk of fire as 'fire weather'. Key factors for wildfires to ignite and spread include low humidity, strong wind, and drought.

Fire weather conditions in January 2025

Large winter wildfires in California are rare. However, an unusually dry winter in 2024 led to abundant dry vegetation. Combined with drought conditions, this meant that the fire risk was very high in January 2025 (World Resources Institute, 2025). Strong winds in January (Santa Ana winds) are not unusual, but the strong winds in combination with the exceptionally dry vegetation resulted in very rapid spread of the wildfires (Hayes, 2025). Find out more about the different weather factors leading to the 2025 wildfires below:

- **Whiplash events**: Southern California experienced a series of whiplash climate events in the months leading up to the fires (Swain et al., 2025). These events consisted of rapid switches between extremely wet and extremely dry conditions (IPCC, 2021).
- **Very heavy rainfall**: Following a prolonged period of drought and below average rainfall, during the winter of 2022/2023 (December 2022-March 2023), Los Angeles received a very high level of rainfall (Figure 5) and the region continued to receive heavy rains between June 2023 – May 2024 because of the El Niño[1]. The vegetation responded quickly to this sudden influx of water and the dense vegetation growth resulted many parts of Los Angeles being 30% greener than average by summer 2024 (Cassidy, 2025).



Winter rainfall (December-March) in the 100 km radius around Los Angeles city as compared to expected for the climatology period 1991-2020 using the CHIRPS data (Funk et al., 2015). The dark blue line shows two standard deviations above expected, the light blue line shows one standard deviation above expected, the black line shows the expected rainfall, the light brown line shows one standard deviation below expected and the dark brown line shows two standard deviations below expected.

- **Drought**: Abundant vegetation combined with a period of drought, and warm, dry weather in Los Angeles during the last eight months of 2024, meant there was a higher-than-average amount of dry fuel to burn (Barbosa, 2025; Earth Observatory, 2025).
- **The Santa Ana winds**: Originating from desert regions such as Nevada and Utah, these katabatic winds (Figure 6), which descend from higher elevations like mountains, are exceptionally hot. They significantly contribute to the drying of vegetation and the movement of fires. Due to their low humidity, these winds dry out trees and grass, making them fuel for wildfires. They are also called “hair dryer winds” for this reason. Wind speeds typically range between 60 to 80 mph but can reach up to 100 mph during severe events. These strong, unpredictable winds make firefighting much harder, as they can carry embers over long distances, igniting fires on rooftops and in gardens (Taylor, 2025; Henriques et al., 2025).

[1] *The name ‘El Niño’ is widely used to describe the warming of sea surface temperature that occurs every few years, typically concentrated in the central-east equatorial Pacific. An El Niño is declared when sea temperatures in the tropical eastern Pacific rise 0.5 °C above the long-term average. El Niño is felt strongly in the tropical eastern Pacific with warmer than average weather.*

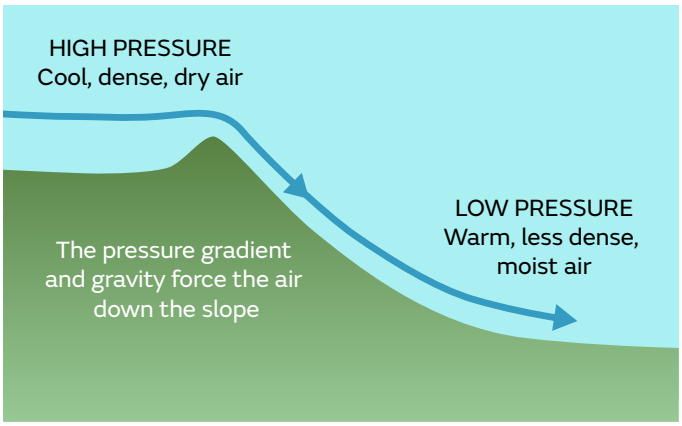


Figure 6. Katabatic winds - the forces of gravity and air pressure gradient drive dense cool, dry air down from high altitudes such as mountains, towards areas of low pressure, funnelling in river valleys and through passes https://www.yachtingmonthly.com/sailing-skills/katabatic-wind-not-62826.

Impacts of the wildfires

The impacts of wildfires are far-reaching and complex, affecting society, the economy, and the environment. Social impacts include health issues, fatalities, homelessness, and community disruptions. Economically, wildfires can lead to massive financial losses, increased insurance rates, and crime. Environmental impacts encompass wildlife destruction and deteriorated air quality. Read more about these impacts below:

Societal impacts

- **Impact on health and loss of life**: The 2025 Los Angeles wildfires have resulted in 30 fatalities (Anguiano, 2025). This number could rise due to the indirect effects of the wildfire, such as the release of harmful chemicals, heavy metals, asbestos, and other toxic pollutants into the air, soil, and water (Datz, 2025). These pollutants can lead to various health issues, including respiratory conditions like asthma, neurological impacts such as headaches, and cardiovascular problems like heart disease. The impact on mental health is also a concern, as communities face the loss of loved ones, homes, and the challenge of dealing with the aftermath of such destructive wildfires.
- **Homelessness**: Displacement of people from their homes and communities is a huge issue following the wildfires with close to 200,000 people under evacuation orders and over 16,000 building destroyed (Stelloh et al., 2025). This could make California's housing crisis worse, as many people might not be able to rebuild their homes due to the high costs, and with many insurance companies not renewing policies before the fires broke out (Darmiento et al., 20255). This could drive-up rental prices and increase homelessness especially among the most vulnerable groups e.g. low-income, poor health and disabled, and the elderly (Kendall, 2025).

Low-income communities

Census tracts at or below 80% of the state-wide median income, or at or below the threshold designated as low-income by the California Department of Housing and Community Development's (HCD) Revised 2021 State Income Limits.

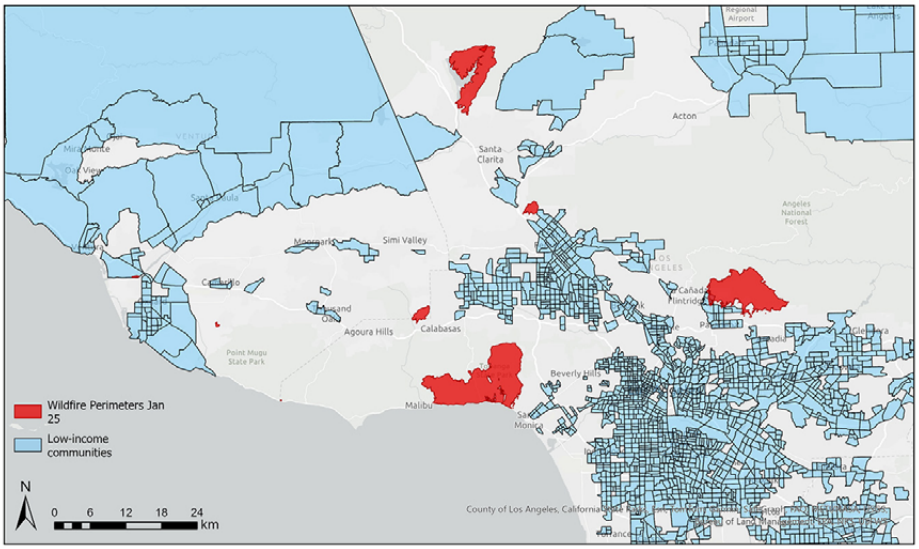


Figure 7. Map showing the location of low-income communities in LA and the 2025 wildfire perimeters.

- **Community disruption**: Schools, healthcare facilities, and businesses are facing long-term closures, which is disrupting daily life for thousands of individuals and families. Surgeries are being delayed, over 300 child-care facilities are closed, and thousands of students should be attending schools that were destroyed or damaged by the LA Wildfires (Sequeira and Gold, 2025; Jiminez, 2025). Historical monuments and landmarks have also been lost that are of cultural and religious importance such as the 100+ year old Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center, and the Guiness World Record holding Bunny Museum (Leib, 2025).
- **Insurance**: Insurance rates are predicted to rise following the recent catastrophic fires in Los Angeles. Insurance companies such as State Farm General, one of California's largest home insurers, may potentially increase prices by 22% (Dunbar, 2025).
- **Economic Impacts**: The anticipated economic loss from the wildfires is estimated to be between $250 billion and $275 billion (Vincent, 2025). This includes the costs associated with property damage, loss of lives, healthcare expenses, disruptions to businesses.
- **Crime**: At least 17 people have been charged with arson, looting, and impersonating firefighters during the wildfire events. (Pequeno IV, 2025).

Environmental and ecological Impacts

- **Wildlife**: Wildfires can impact wildlife in many ways. They can cause direct deaths from the flames and destroy habitats and food sources. It's not just land-based wildlife such as bears and mountain lions that are at risk; the runoff of debris, ash, and other toxic chemicals into oceans and rivers can also cause serious harm. This can lead to changes in water pH levels, reduced sunlight for photosynthesis due to smoke, and oxygen levels being affected by algae blooms and increased nutrients (Senzaki and Deehan, 2025). These knock-on effects can harm or even kill marine life and the animals that prey on them.
- **Air Quality**: Wildfire smoke poses a significant health risk. It can contain hazardous chemicals like carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and ammonium phosphate, along with heavy metals such as chromium and cadmium, which are contained in substances used by firefighters to combat the flames e.g. fire retardants dropped by planes (Saey, 2025). The impact extends beyond the burned structures, as wildfire smoke can deteriorate air quality hundreds of miles away from LA (National Weather Service, 2025). Among the pollutants released, fine particulate matter (PM2.5) is the most concerning, as these tiny particles can severely affect respiratory and cardiovascular health (Cohen, 2025).
- **Impact on soil and water**: Increased water runoff after a wildfire is a significant concern for Los Angeles. This happens because the intense fires destroy plants and trees, making the soil unstable and unable to absorb water (State Water Resources Control Board, 2025). Instead, the soil repels water, which is called being hydrophobic. When this happens, water from rain and firefighting efforts can cause erosion, carrying debris, ash, and toxic chemicals into nearby bodies of water. This can lead to flash floods and landslides, which have a big impact on the environment, people and wildfire in the area.

Responses to the Wildfires

Short-Term Responses

- **Evacuations**: 200,000 people under evacuation orders (Stelloh et al., 2025).
- **Emergency Shelters**: Temporary shelters and hotels provided essential services, including food, water, and medical aid (Los Angeles Housing Department, 2025).
- **Firefighting Operations**: A team of over 7,500 firefighters, supported by aerial water-dropping planes, worked to extinguish the fires, whilst machinery including bulldozers were used to clear the debris and create fire breaks to stop the fire from advancing through fuel clearance (Figure 8) (Governor Newsom, 2025a). International aid also played a role key role in fighting the fires with firefighters from Mexico and Canada along with air tankers helping to combat the fires (Fuentes, 2025).

Figure 8. A helicopter equipped with a water bucket to combat the wildfires.

Long-Term Responses

- **Community Rebuilding**: Funds have been allocated for infrastructure and home reconstruction including a $2.5 billion disaster relief fund the Governor of LA (Governor Newsom, 2025b). Experts have emphasised the need to rebuild with fire-resistant designs and materials.
- **Fire prevention**: reduce the likelihood and severity of wildfires, by eliminating or reducing the sources of ignition and fuel. Fire prevention strategies could include enforcing fire bans and restrictions during periods of high fire danger, raising public awareness, creating firebreaks and buffer zones, managing flammable vegetation, and restoring or maintaining healthy ecosystems.
- **Fire adaptation**: enhance the resilience and recovery of the environment, economy, and public health, by reducing the vulnerability and exposure to wildfires. Fire adaptation approaches include developing and implementing fire management plans, incorporating fire risk into land use and spatial planning, improving the design and construction of buildings and infrastructure, and providing health and social support to the affected communities.
- **Ecological Restoration**: Planting native trees and shrubs (reforestation) and using land responsibly can help reduce the risks of wildfires over time. By including Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles in city planning and business strategies, decision-makers can create stronger and more resilient communities (Institute of Risk Management, 2025).

Climate Change and Wildfire Risks

Two critical factors that increase the risk of wildfires, driven by climate change, are weather conditions (fire weather) and human activities such as land use, agriculture, forestry, and recreation, which can raise the likelihood of ignition. Think about the increased number more people having BBQs in the summer because of the greater number of hot and dry days, and how that may contribute to this increased fire risk.

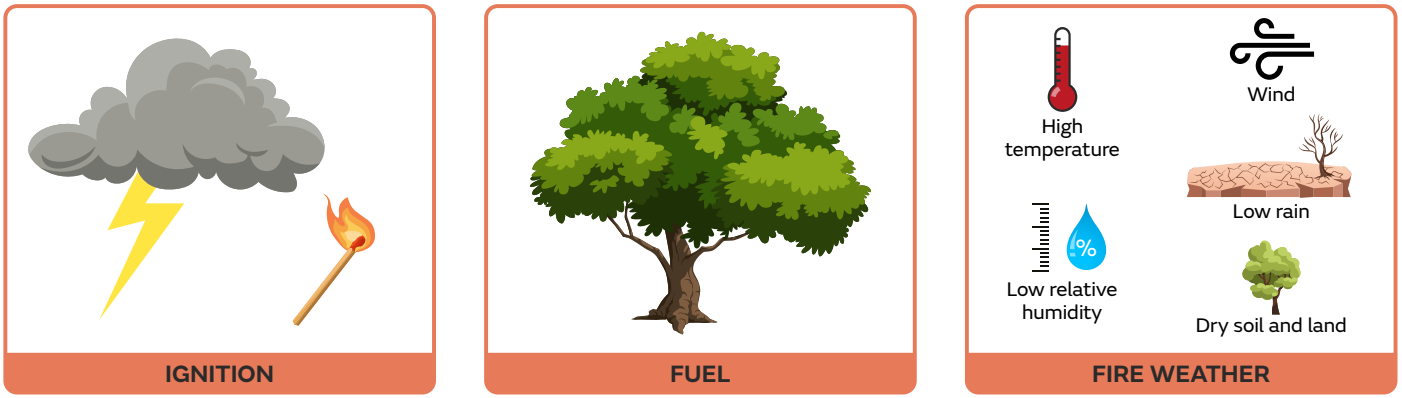


Figure 9. Fires are the result of a comlex interaction of biological, meteorological, physical and social factors. When there is something to start a fire (ignition) and something to burn (fuel), a fire will start. Wildfires can be amplified by 'fire weather' conditions, such as high wind, high ait temperatures, low relative humidity, and low rainfall.

How is climate change affecting wildfire risk?

The frequency and severity of wildfires depend on various factors, such as:

The type and amount of fuel

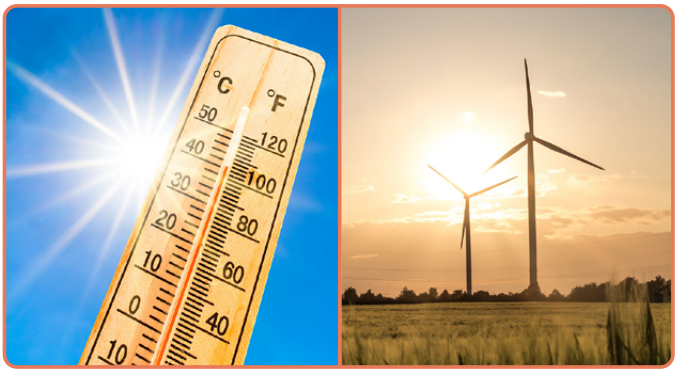
Land use and management practices

Topography

How is climate change affecting wildfire risk?

However, two critical factors increasing the risk of wildfires, driven by climate change, are:

Human activities

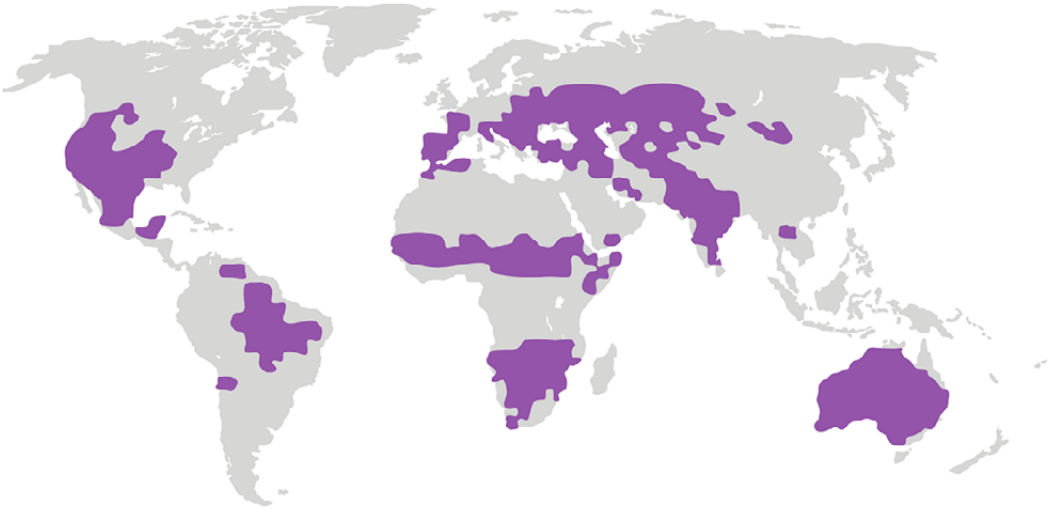


Fire weather

Climate change has driven a 16-62% rise in burnt area across western North America, with devastating consequences for regions like Los Angeles and beyond (Burton et al., 2024). Scientists have shown that human-induced climate change has increased the likelihood of the fire weather that drove the LA wildfires by 35% compared to preindustrial conditions and increased the intensity of the wildfires by 6% (World Weather Attribution, 2025). Key climate impacts include:

- **Prolonged Droughts**: A direct link between climate change and drought is complicated by the many meteorological, hydrological, geological, and societal drivers that combine to cause droughts. However, there is increasing evidence that climate change is influencing rainfall patterns in many regions around the world.
- **Variable Precipitation Patterns**: Climate change has intensified the whiplash climate phenomenon, where heavy rains are followed by extended dry spells, creating flammable vegetation (Tan et al., 2025).
- **Extended Fire Seasons**: Historically, Southern California's wildfire season occurred during late summer and autumn. However, it now extends throughout the year, including winter months such as January. Warmer and wetter winters are lengthening the growing season increasing the availability of fuel to burn, while hotter, and drier summers are resulting in drought conditions and drier more flammable fuel.

Listen to the BBC's Rare Earth podcast episode World on Fire, and hear Met Office Senior Climate Scientist Dr Stacey New explore the global wildfire threat.



The risk of wildfires increases under hot, dry, windy conditions, which can be quantified with the McArthur Forest Fire Danger Index (FFDI). The map shows where fire danger is projected to be "very high" or above (FFDI > 25) for more than 10 days per year at 4°C global warming.

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