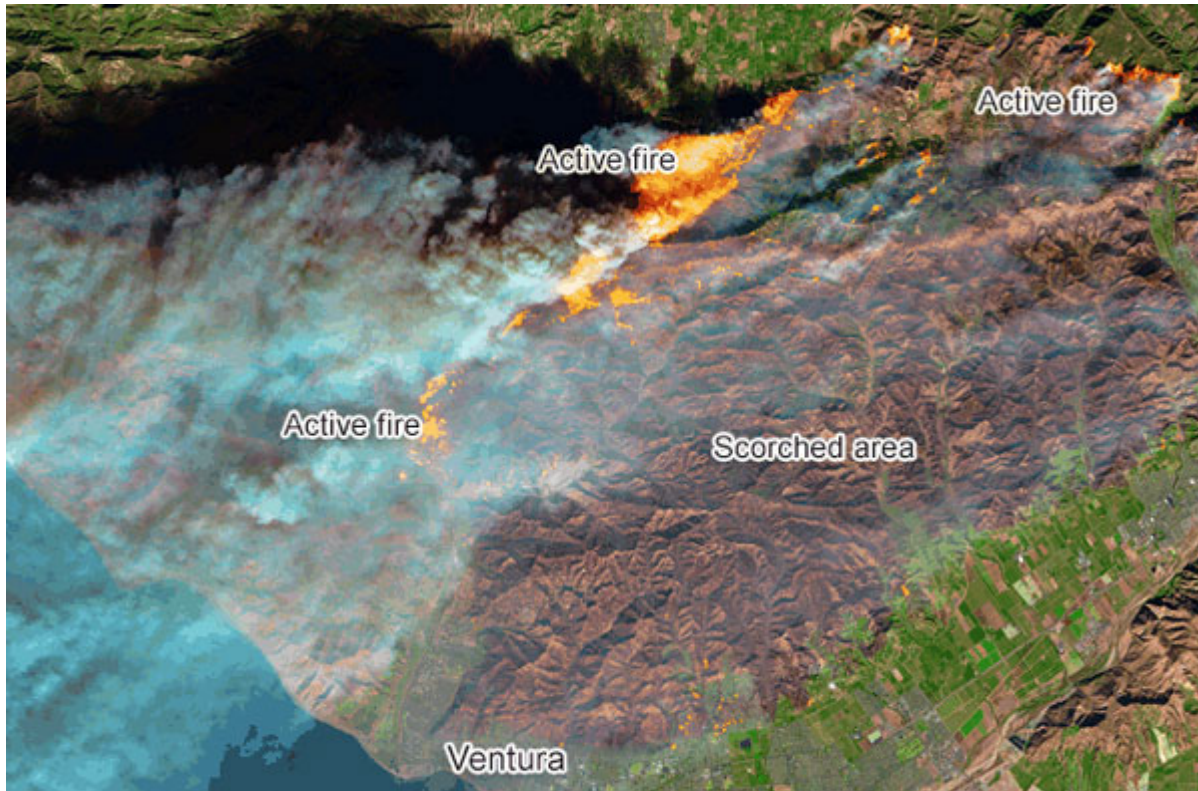


California wildfires: Nearly 200,000 flee amid new blaze

Friday, 08 December 2017 08:48

Nearly 200,000 residents have now been evacuated due to California wildfires as crews pivot to fight a new blaze.



NASA Earth Observatory

BBC

Some 5,000 firefighters have been battling four brushfires that have destroyed hundreds of homes in the south of the state.

The number of evacuees nearly quadrupled on Thursday as a fifth fire broke out north of San Diego.

One death has been reported so far - a woman's body was found in a burned-out area in Ventura County.

But an official told the Ventura County Star newspaper that the death in the town of Ojai may have been a car crash and it's unclear if it was fire-related.

By Thursday afternoon local time, California's fire service said the blaze had forced the evacuation of 189,000 residents.

The newest blaze, the Lilac fire, has scorched at least 2,500 acres (1,000 hectares), the state fire authority said on Twitter.

California Governor Jerry Brown has declared a state of emergency in the area.

A Reuters news agency photographer at the scene described seeing propane tanks under houses explode like bombs.

The White House said it was in contact with Californian authorities and ready to offer whatever help is needed.

Authorities have issued a purple alert - the highest level warning - amid what it called "extremely critical fire weather".

The powerful desert-heated Santa Ana winds have been fanning the flames.

The University of California, Los Angeles cancelled all classes on Thursday.

Though its campus lies outside the evacuation zone on the city's west side, it said it took the decision "given the array of uncertainties".

One in four schools in Los Angeles were also closed.

In the wealthy Los Angeles enclave of Bel Air, firefighters were seen removing artwork from luxury homes on Wednesday as the Skirball Fire raged.

The neighbourhood is home to celebrities and business leaders from Beyonce to Elon Musk.

Singer Lionel Richie cancelled a Las Vegas performance for Wednesday evening, saying he was "helping family evacuate to a safer place".

An estate and vineyard owned by Rupert Murdoch also suffered some damage.

The media mogul said in a statement: "We believe the winery and house are still intact."

The Los Angeles Times said Mr Murdoch paid nearly \$30m (£22m) for the property four years ago.

The Getty Museum, which is also at risk, said it would remain closed on Thursday.

It said it had not removed its artworks and that air filtration systems were protecting its collection - including pieces by Leonardo da Vinci, Van Gogh and Turner - from smoke damage.

The Thomas Fire in Ventura County remains the largest, having spread as far as the Pacific coast, and satellite images showing swathes of scorched earth.

Another blaze north of Los Angeles, the Creek Fire, was only 10% contained and covered some

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12,605 acres.

Source: *BBC*