



NEWS



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New storm system expected to spare Southern California while drenching the north

By Emily Holshouser, SB SUN

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Armando Chavez works to unbury a vehicle in Lake Arrowhead on Wednesday, Mar. 8, 2023. (Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

As Southern California’s weather-weary mountain communities continued to recover from severe storms that have snowed in many residents, San Bernardino County authorities urged calm ahead of another “atmospheric river” lurking to the north, saying Wednesday that the latest, weaker system could bring about an inch of rainfall to the area but otherwise would spare the region of another public safety crisis.

According to the National Weather Service, a warmer system that’s expected to slam into Northern California early Thursday will move through Southern California beginning late in the evening

The storm is not expected to pack nearly the punch of the cold storms that swept through Southern California several days ago: It likely will bring some rain to most areas, with snow possible mainly above 7,000 feet in elevation. The state’s central and northern coast will get drenched, but Southern California could see around an inch of rain at most.

“The most significant impacts we’re expecting from this will be non-life threatening flooding,” said National Weather Service meteorologist Philip Gonsalves. “Depending on where the water runs off, the combination of rainfall and some melting of existing snow is expected to produce non-life-threatening flooding, but some of the flooding, depending on where the water gets routed, could end up getting into people’s homes.”

Although it is not predicted that there will not be any significant damage in mountain communities, locals who are still digging their neighbors out of the snow and facing trauma from the past couple of weeks are on edge.

“I can see the concerns,” said Lake Arrowhead resident Natalia Hinkleman, who has been helping with a massive volunteer donation effort. “We definitely have spots that will flood easily, but we’ve never had this amount of snow on the ground.”

Lake Arrowhead resident Lisa Griggs, another volunteer, lives in a flood zone within the mountain community. Days of digging through hard snow and speaking to neighbors whose lives were upended by the blizzard has made her weary.

“Mother Nature is a very interesting beast,” Griggs said. “For me, I like to get out ahead of things.”

Some residents are also concerned about added moisture buckling the roofs of houses piled high with days-old snow.

“I’m personally not concerned that the weather will be worse than forecasted,” said Lake Arrowhead resident Dawn Diggle. “I am, however, concerned that even an inch’s worth of water on an already stressed and cracking structure will be the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Several structures in the mountains have been red-tagged, according to San Bernardino County representative David Wert, though the number of red tagged buildings has not been made public yet.

“We’re following the modeling very closely to see what the potential impact will see in the mountain communities,” said **San Bernardino County Fire** Department representative Eric Sherwin, who understood the anxiety. Residents have “been through enough as it is, and I think everyone is on edge and concerned.”

“I think people have a lot of fear right now because with the last storm, nobody knew it would storm that much,” said Lake Arrowhead resident Susie Newman-Harrison. “We don’t know what’s coming. We’re a little nervous....we pray to God that it’s not as bad.”

Above all, local agencies are urging residents to prepare for this storm like they would for any other: stock up on food, check on your neighbors, and to anticipate possible water damage. The **San Bernardino County Fire** Department is offering sandbags at several fire stations for residents who want them around their homes.

The storm will make for a wet weekend, even if the actual rain accumulated won’t amount to much.

Rain will be heaviest Thursday night through Saturday, with about 0.75-1.5 inches possible in Los Angeles and Ventura counties. After the storm clears, temperatures will be in the 50s and 60s for much of the region, potentially reaching the low 70s in the San Fernando Valley on Monday, March 13.

<https://www.sbsun.com/2023/03/08/new-storm-system-expected-to-spare-southern-california-while-drenching-the-north/>

Multiple house fires amid winter storms

By Angela Yap, SB SUN

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House engulfed in fire immediately after explosion heard by neighbors on West Victoria Court in Lake Arrowhead.

Over 10 home fires, including some started by an explosion, have been reported in Lake Arrowhead and surrounding communities over the last 10 days.

As homes in the mountain communities are trapped in snow drifts as high as 10 feet, some residents have been worried due to a strong gas smell permeating much of the area, leading some to ask if the smell is coming from gas meters buried under the deep snow.

San Bernardino County Fire Chief Dan Munsey told the Mountain News, “This storm event has been unprecedented and incredibly taxing for our responders and citizens. I realize clearly how frustrating it has been for many of our residents as they have waited for assistance.”

When asked about the cause of recent house fires, Munsey said, “The structure fires are still under investigation. We have deployed several fire investigation teams to determine the cause and origin. However, it will be some time before official causes are released. I will state that some of these fires have been caused by heavy ice or snow load that has fallen and made contact with a gas meter.”

Initially, Southern California Gas Company said that snow-covered gas meters should not cause major problems when concerned residents inquired. However, over the weekend, SoCal Gas sent out a message via social media stating, “If you can and if it is safe to do so, we encourage you to clear the snow away from your meter with a broom or brush - - never use a shovel or hard object to remove the snow from the meter as this risks damaging the meter. Residents should know there are no system wide gas outages or interruptions in the area. In the majority of instances, your meter being buried in snow does not present a safety hazard, however falling snow and ice could potentially damage your meter. If you do not smell gas, please do not turn off your gas meter. If you believe your gas meter has been damaged or smell gas, please call the fire department or SoCalGas at 1-800-427-2200 immediately.”

SoCalGas advises residents to make sure that “gas appliance intake and exhaust vents are clear of obstructions” if snow is accumulating on their rooftops.

San Bernardino County Fire Battalion Chief Mike McClintock said as of Friday it was not clear if gas leaks were the cause of house fires in Lake Arrowhead over the past week.

One house fire took place on Crest Fern where a couple suffered from major burn. Due to deep snow conditions the fire department could not arrive on time to save the house. Another fire engulfed a home on Augusta Court at night. One other home in Arrowhead Villas on Larchmont Lane and one in Twin Peaks also caught fire among others.

CREST FERN HOUSE FIRE

“The home at Crest Fern caught fire Monday, March 1, at 1:30 p.m. in the afternoon,” said Joyce Patrick who lives in the neighborhood. “The residents Mike and Ari escaped with second and 3rd degree burns.”

“Mike sustained a dislocated shoulder while being pulled from under the debris,” said Joyce. “They were transported to Mountains Community and their cat Mona did not survive the fire but their German shepherd, Bear, is being cared for by a close neighbor.”

“It’s unknown whether or not the roof collapsed or the explosion happened first. But there was an explosion and flames engulfed the home,” Joyce added. “Crest Fern was impassible at the time of the fire. The access road to Burnt Mill, as well as the exit at 173 had not been plowed since the beginning of the storm.”

A close neighbor, Michael Morehart heard the explosion, dawned his snow shoes and took off running towards the fire, shard Joyce Patrick.

AUGUSTA HOUSE FIRE

“It was 2:30 a.m. when a neighbor banged on my door,” said Gavin Bialecki who lives on Spyglass. “It was two houses away up my access road on Augusta Court.”

“A number of fire trucks arrived,” added Bialecki. “Luckily the house was not occupied.”

With many roads in the area impassible due to snow, firefighters used snowplows and snow cats to gain access.

Witnesses said residents were digging out a snow-covered fire hydrant when firefighters arrived at some of these house fires.

“I want to thank our mountain residence for their resiliency and patience as they have waited for our team to arrive,” said Chief Munsey. “We have deployed all available resources and have hired as many additional handcrews, engines, and front end-loaders as logistically possible to support the efforts.”

W. VICTORIA COURT HOUSE FIRE

On Monday evening, March 6, 2023, a house on West Victoria Court exploded and the house was immediately engulfed in fire.

Victoria Rogers who lives right next door immediately called 911, and the fire crew arrived 20 minutes later. Luckily the street was finally plowed just two days prior.

“The power of the explosion made us fall over and it broke my window,” said Victoria Rogers. “Some of the fire crew were leaning against my house trying to keep the fire away. With so many broken windows, I will have to bard them up.”

According to Victoria Rogers, no one was home and she already contacted the part time neighbor.

“The fire crew is turning off our gas, so I will have no heat for a while until they fix the gas line,” added Victoria.

The county has set up a hotline for residents dealing with issues like frozen pipes, roof problems and food shortages, call (909)387-3911.

<https://mountain-news.com/news/42049/multiple-house-fires-amid-winter-storms/>

Southern California snowstorm leads to deaths, including a 93-year-old woman who was trapped in her home

By Alicia Victoria Lozano, NBC NEWS

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Fire crews document the damage to a house with a collapsed roof in Crestline, Calif., on Monday.

LOS ANGELES — Frustrated Southern California mountain residents are finally digging themselves out of a historic winter storm that dumped more than 100 inches of snow in a region that had been facing unprecedented drought conditions just a few months earlier.

The ferocity of the storm in the San Bernardino Mountains east of Los Angeles appeared to catch both residents and officials off guard and unprepared, leaving hundreds of residents trapped for nearly two weeks as roads became impassable and roofs collapsed under the weight of a weather event rarely experienced in this part of the state.

Hikers were stranded, and people posted on social media about their loved ones stuck in cabins with no way out. The sheriff's department delivered freeze-dried meals to people who were running out of food, but not everyone could access emergency pantries because of closed roads.

"Nobody expected that much snow," said Valli Bryan Compton, whose great aunt, Elinor "Dolly" Avenatti, 93, was found dead Monday in her home in Crestline by a concerned neighbor who was checking on her.

"It's hard to say it's the government's fault or it's the city's fault," she added. "I just wish they could have let people go up there because we could have gotten her."

County officials said at least one person died in a car accident caused by the snow, but they did not have a final death count.

Crestline resident Terri Lee said Wednesday she has been snowed in for 14 days and will run out of lifesaving medication by Friday for congestive heart failure and pulmonary hypertension. Her husband has severe arthritis in his back and is unable to shovel the snow that has blocked the couple's front door.

"It's a scary situation," Lee said. "We can't get out of our driveway, and we can't open the front door because the snow has piled up so high."

Lee estimated she called a county emergency hotline at least six times asking for help. She has also called 911 but was referred to the county.

As of Wednesday afternoon, help had not arrived, but a spokesperson for the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department said Lee's case would be escalated.

"We were prepared with enough food for two weeks but never expected it would take so long to clear the snow," Lee said. "The county had plenty of time to prepare and they did nothing."

Mountain highways began to reopen this week after being closed for more than 10 days, according to the California Highway Patrol. By Tuesday, 90% of roads had been plowed with more anticipated ahead of a storm that could bring warmer temperatures, rain and potential flooding from rapid snowmelt.

"We understand that people are not happy about being trapped in their homes," said David Wert, spokesman for San Bernardino County. "This was really unavoidable. When you have 10 feet of snow, there is no way to make it disappear instantly."

The weather took a turn for the worse in late February as an arctic air mass plunged down the West Coast, prompting a rare blizzard warning. In an extremely unusual storm, staggering amounts of snow fell in the San Bernardino and neighboring San Gabriel mountains, where thousands of people live in or visit high-elevation communities reached by winding, steep highways.

Both ranges routinely receive winter snowfall, but what looked like the foundation for epic downhill ski days instead became a nightmare for Compton and her family.

She last spoke with Avenatti, her great aunt, on Feb. 28 when she warned relatives not to visit because of dangerous road conditions. During their last conversation, Avenatti was her usual spry self and answered the phone in good spirits.

"Winter wonderland!" Compton remembers Avenatti saying.

The power went out once during their call, and it took Compton about 20 minutes to get her great aunt back on the phone. The next day, Compton checked outages in Avenatti's neighborhood and saw that her great aunt, who lived alone, had most likely lost power again.

Her body was discovered Monday, sitting next to the fireplace.

"If she had power and wasn't trapped in the house, I 99.99% believe she would still be here today," Compton said. "At least she lived a great life and passed away in her happy place."

The extreme weather prompted Gov. Gavin Newsom to declare emergencies in 13 of California's 58 counties, beginning March 1. Since then, a multiagency response team has deployed some 800 personnel to remove more than 7.2 million cubic yards of snow off state highways in San Bernardino County, or enough to fill 2,270 Olympic-size swimming pools, according to the state's office of emergency management.

Big Bear City in the San Gabriel Mountains received 80 inches of snow over a seven-day period, the most since records have been tracked, according to the National Weather Service. Until this year, the most snow recorded in seven days there was 58 inches in 1979.

Despite a blizzard warning, no evacuations were ordered ahead of the storm.

"Evacuations were never on the table," Wert, the county spokesman, said Wednesday. "They were never discussed. Have you ever heard of evacuations before a snowstorm in any part of the country?"

Mike McClintock, battalion chief with the **San Bernardino County Fire** Department, said the area had never experienced a snow emergency of this magnitude.

"The amount of snow is no shortage of a challenge for first responders and crews," he said, adding that difficult road conditions have slowed recovery efforts.

San Bernardino County authorities said so much snow fell, it exceeded the ability of plows to clear roads, requiring earth-moving equipment and dump trucks to pick up and move snow.

A shortage of tire chains further hampered the response, a problem the county is already working to fix by ordering more chains for bulldozers and trucks, Wert said.

Highways were closed to all but emergency vehicles until this week, frustrating residents who had been away when the storm hit and were prohibited from heading back up to their homes.

Sections of key mountain roads in the Big Bear area were finally reopened Monday afternoon to residents only. The California Highway Patrol warned people returning home that they may encounter enormous snow drifts, downed power lines and potential gas leaks.

Roof collapses caused by the weight of the snow were reported, including a grocery store in the community of Crestline, where resident Cierra Lavarias said her family was stranded for nearly two weeks.

"We knew this was going to be a significant weather event days in advance. Where is the planning? Continuity? This is an epic failure of our local government," she said in a Facebook post. "Good thing is, us 'mountain folk' are strong and will continue to take care of each other."

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/93-year-old-woman-dies-trapped-home-blizzard-hit-southern-california-m-rcna73858>

Trapped by Snow, Residents Ask Why Help Arrived so Late

By Summer Lin, Nathan Solis, Luke Money and Grace Toohey, GOVTECH

March 9, 2023

(TNS) - Officials knew the San Bernardino County mountains were going to be hit by a bad storm days before an unprecedented blizzard rolled in.

But they found themselves unprepared for the historic amount of snow and the disruptions it would bring. More than 100 inches of snow fell in back-to-back storms over the course of a few days, shutting down most mountain roads and leaving multiple communities stranded, some for nearly two weeks since.

Some of the snowplows local officials had available proved no match for the massive accumulation of snow. And because much of California was also experiencing record-setting wintry weather, supplemental supplies from other counties were unavailable, officials said.

The series of storms and the damage they inflicted on the mountain communities proved to be a harsh lesson for local officials who were tested like never before by the extraordinary challenges.

“The unique and challenging part of this storm was that it hit so many parts of our state simultaneously, so you’re unable to move equipment from other parts of the state that are trying to keep their lifeline roads open,” said Brian Ferguson, a spokesman for the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services.

He called the storms that hit San Bernardino’s highest elevations unprecedented and particularly challenging to respond to.

“It really is a street fight — street by street, neighborhood by neighborhood,” Ferguson said.

It was not until early this week that many roads were finally cleared and residents — some running low on food and medication — could get out. Others still remain stranded and frustrated by the delays in getting their roads cleared.

“It’s a shameful situation because if you watch the local news, you’re gonna see reports saying the county has boots on the ground and that they’re handling everything,” said Megan Vasquez, who lives in Crestline. “My street wasn’t plowed until this morning.”

She and others in surrounding communities question why officials were not better prepared. She said a private resident — not the county — plowed her neighborhood’s street Tuesday morning.

“It definitely felt like we were being forgotten,” said Vasquez, who helped start a food distribution center for her neighborhood after many couldn’t reach the county’s. “It’s been a very disheartening time to see the lack of ... officials actually coming in and trying to do something for this area.”

Some officials have already acknowledged the need to learn from the storm.

“Hindsight is always 2020,” San Bernardino County Chief Executive Leonard Hernandez said during a recent video briefing. “Even though I believe the team did an amazing job of mobilizing before, if the National Weather Service ever issues a blizzard warning again, we will take a different approach immediately.”

But the storms' strength was also new for the county: Ahead of the initial system's arrival, the weather service office in San Diego issued its first-ever blizzard warning for the region.

"We've never had one before," Hernandez said Thursday during a livestream on county Supervisor Dawn Rowe's Facebook page. "We have a pretty set playbook of the different types of disasters in the county, unfortunately, since we're so large. We have the wildland fires, we have earthquakes, we have floods, we have acts of terror. Well, now we get to add blizzard into our playbook."

So much snow fell so quickly it rendered ineffective the front-end plows typically used for routine road maintenance, officials previously said. And there wasn't enough time to request extra equipment from other jurisdictions, though it probably wouldn't have been available as Northern California was also contending with heavy snow, they added.

"The warning that we had for the blizzard wasn't weeks," **San Bernardino County Fire** Chief Dan Munsey said during a recent news conference. "We only knew 24 to 36 hours there was a strong potential this was going to occur."

San Bernardino County "planned days in advance, mobilized our complete workforce, brought in all the contractors that we had available" in anticipation of the wintry weather, Hernandez said. But in terms of snowfall, "it was beyond the worst-case scenario."

"You have our commitment as an organization that there are a lot of lessons that we're going to learn from this," he said.

Adam Roser, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in the San Diego office, said there was "proper warning" even before a blizzard warning was issued.

Daily weather briefings were sent to different partners, including county emergency management, city emergency managers and fire departments, Roser said. There was also a winter storm warning issued before the blizzard warning had gone out.

In the seven days leading up to March 2, more than 150 inches of snow fell near Running Springs, while areas east of Big Bear Lake got 134 inches and 115 inches fell northeast of Mt. Baldy, according to the National Weather Service's San Diego office. Lake Arrowhead got about 110 inches and Crestline about 100, while the city of Big Bear Lake saw about 85 inches. Forest Falls and Wrightwood received about 70 and 60 inches, respectively.

The California Department of Transportation began preparing last week by placing de-icing agents on state highways, inspecting snow vehicles and clearing storm drains, according to Caltrans spokesman Eric Dionne.

"With all of that said, as an organization, we will do assessments and see where we could have improved," he said.

More Caltrans crews were also brought into mountain regions before the storm began, he added.

"We advised the traveling public that travel was highly discouraged, yet many still came up," Dionne said. "There were a lot of abandoned cars on our infrastructure that really slowed production and snow removal efforts."

While the state bears responsibility for clearing major highways, other roads are the purview of the county. There are also privately owned roads that residents are typically responsible for clearing themselves.

As of Tuesday, San Bernardino County officials said 91% of county roads have been plowed, though **San Bernardino County Fire** Battalion Chief Mike McClintock said that includes roads that might still only fit single-lane traffic, and still need to be widened.

That's not to mention the challenge of where to put plowed snow — which officials said has become an ongoing problem.

“The sheer amount of snow that has dropped in our roadways, where do you put it?” McClintock said. “Everywhere has 10 feet of snow ... there's not a lot of places to put the snow.”

Big Bear Lake, the only incorporated city among San Bernardino's highest peaks, has fared relatively better in the storms' aftermath, which some officials attributed to two factors: It got less snow than western neighbors such as Crestline and Lake Arrowhead, and it had more resources ready to respond quickly.

“Not to take anything away from our fellow partners and county agencies, but they have a much larger area to accommodate,” said Mayor Randall Putz. “We have that advantage.”

He said the city has full control over its six square miles, which includes budgeting, resources and staffing — whereas harder-hit areas like Lake Arrowhead or Running Springs are all serviced by the county. With its own public works team, contractors, leased equipment and around-the-clock response, Big Bear Lake had more of its roads cleared faster, though it's still a work in progress, officials said. As of Monday, most were passable, though not to their full width, and many driveways remained blocked by berms.

“This is basically what we think about every winter, it's not a surprise for us,” said Rick Herrick, a Big Bear Lake council member. “We want to get the roads open, then our visitors can come up, then the businesses will flourish.”

In the meantime, communities up and down California are still reeling from a winter that's brought not just blanketing snow, but record-shattering rainfall and disastrous flooding.

“What we are seeing here, again, is just another example of the challenges we face as a state due to a changing climate: Weather whiplash of extreme heat followed by torrential rains followed by snow followed by drought,” Ferguson said. “So we continue to evolve as a state to meet this need, but disasters continue to be more frequent and more severe.”

Although progress has been made in recent days, the work is far from over.

Rachelle Angere, of Crestline, spent the last six days without electricity. She and her Jack Russell terrier, Bully, were snowed-in at a friend's house. They burned lots of paper and wood.

“When we ran out of wood, I was digging in the snow for more wood to burn,” Angere said Tuesday while picking up food at a county-operated food distribution site at the Crestline Library.

Her electricity came back Monday night, and the roads around her neighborhood were cleared in the early morning. But the roads that lead to her home remained blocked, and she blames the county for not acting sooner to clear them.

“If they would have plowed from the beginning, every few hours, it wouldn’t be as dramatic as it is now,” Angere said. “I was on the road and it was just ridiculous.”

She can walk around the main drag in Crestline but is worried that if she leaves to go down the mountain for supplies, she might not be able to return.

“I feel trapped here,” she said as she shouldered a loaf of bread and several boxes of food.

<https://www.govtech.com/em/preparedness/trapped-by-snow-residents-ask-why-help-arrived-so-late>