

Flooding hits Northern California area scarred by wildfire

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Mud and debris has flowed down normally-dry Solstice Creek in an area burned by the Woolsey Fire in Malibu, California. Coastal health authorities are urging people to stay away from beach water, which may contain bacteria, chemicals, debris, trash and other public health hazards due to runoff. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

San Francisco: Flash flooding hit a wildfire-scarred area of Northern California on Thursday, forcing officials to deploy swift water rescue teams to save people stuck in vehicles and rescue them from homes after a downpour near the Paradise area.

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Dale Word, a firmware engineer, was evacuated briefly Thursday from his semi-rural Chico neighborhood for the second time this month.

Word waded out in thigh-high water to higher ground until the rain receded, leaving a mess of sticky mud and debris. He said he was stunned by the disasters that have hit Butte County. The fire came within several hundred feet of his home.

An Orange County Public Works employee takes video of the flash flood water blackened by ash and debris from the Holy Fire as it rushes along Trabuco Creek and under Trabuco Canyon Road in Trabuco Canyon, California. (Mark Rightmire/The Orange County Register via AP)

“Everywhere you go you’re talking to people who have lost everything and it’s just tragic,” Word said, jokingly adding, “It feels like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are going to come riding over the hill any day now.”

Thursday’s storm brought 1½ inches of rain in an hour, toppling trees and trapping motorists in flooded roads downstream, said National Weather Service meteorologist Craig Shoemaker.

“This is heavy rain in a short period of time and that’s the worst thing that can happen in the burn scar,” he said.

The Butte County Sheriff’s Department ordered evacuations but could not say how many people were affected. The water rescues were in an area of Chico, which is downhill from Paradise, and a city where many of the wildfire evacuees have been staying since the town of 27,000 was destroyed just three weeks ago by a deadly wildfire.

People from three homes in Chico neighborhood were rescued by boat, said Rick Carhart, a spokesman with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea said that at one point, people in about 100 vehicles were told to stay in place.

Emergency response crews earlier cleared a tree that toppled in the town of Magalia, but no other reports of damage had been received after an inch of rain fell overnight in the burn zone about 140 miles (225 kilometers) northeast of San Francisco.

Paradise has been under mandatory evacuation orders for nearly three weeks since a wildfire killed at least 88 people and destroyed nearly 14,000 homes.

Residents could begin returning early next week, but only if the storm doesn't hinder efforts to clear roads and restore power, said Honea, the sheriff.

In Southern California, authorities ordered evacuations in a small Malibu community within a wildfire burn zone where a mudslide blocked roads amid heavy rains.

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy Joana Warren says residents of several homes were told to leave as streets filled with mud, ash and debris during a downpour. She says no injuries were reported.

A car passes by a sign warning area residents of a flash flood warning along Trabuco Canyon Road in Trabuco Canyon, California as heavy rain and storms moved through Orange County and Southern California. (Mark Rightmire/The Orange County Register via AP)

In the zone that burned this month, the city of Malibu warned of rocks falling on canyon roads and Pepperdine University closed its campus.

The storm knocked out power and flooded roadways across greater Los Angeles. Numerous traffic accidents occurred on slick freeways and most vehicles traveling in the mountains were ordered to put chains on their tires. Mud and rock slides also closed two mountain highways.

Residents were urged to voluntarily evacuate a string of neighborhoods about 45 miles (70 kilometers) southeast of Los Angeles along a flank of the Santa Ana Mountains where a fire burned thousands of acres last summer. Mandatory evacuations were ordered for a small section of the city of Lake Elsinore beneath a burn zone.

West of Los Angeles, rain fell heavily at times in vast areas burned by fires this month and last December — an area where there are strong memories of a January downpour that unleashed devastating debris flows through the community of Montecito that killed 21 people and left two missing.

On the coast near Big Sur, the California Department of Transportation closed a 12-mile (19-kilometer) stretch of Highway 1 because of potential instability.

The scenic route perched between towering mountainsides and the ocean has been dogged by slides since 2016. But the one that hit in May 2017 was monumental, requiring extensive work to rebuild the highway.

The weather service also issued a backcountry avalanche warning for most of the central Sierra, including the Lake Tahoe area.

- AP