

## **Los Angeles against the flames, *The Economist*, January 8 2025.**

*Always vulnerable, the city is increasingly susceptible to fire*

he five fires that on January 9th were still blazing in and around Los Angeles were already among the most destructive in California's history. The scale is staggering, even for a state accustomed to natural disasters. Roughly 130,000 people were told to leave their homes; 2,000 buildings have been destroyed. Because wildfires have come to seem more like a certainty than a risk here, a lot will not be insured. State Farm, an insurer, decided not to renew 70% of its policies in Pacific Palisades, one of the worst-hit areas. abc Los Angeles reckons this has left 1,600 homes there uninsured. Fire crews faced an uneven fight: in the small hours of the morning the neighbourhood fire hydrants ran dry.

People abandoned their cars and fled on foot as the flames approached. Firefighters then bulldozed their vehicles to reach the blaze. Workers evacuated patients in wheelchairs from a nursing home. The sky above the Pacific Coast Highway turned orange and thickened with smoke. Palm fronds smouldered. Extreme winds sparked several firestorms across Los Angeles beginning on January 7th. Nine months without measurable rainfall had primed the city to burn.

By January 9th, two large fires were burning at opposite ends of la County, home to 10m people. One razed the Pacific Palisades, a wealthy neighbourhood on the coast, and swept into Malibu. Another was burning in the foothills above Pasadena, north-east of la. Ash fell like snowflakes over the city's downtown. Flames glowed crimson on the peaks when they were not obscured by black smoke, southern California's own Mount Doom.

Los Angeles is particularly vulnerable to fire. Its rich neighbourhoods and exurbs are where cities meet nature, stretching into the region's rambling mountain ranges: the Santa Monicas, the Verdugos, the San Gabriels. Climate change is causing more extreme and more frequent fires, but ever more people are moving into these areas to find cheaper housing or, for la's well-heeled, that perfect mountain view. Until recently, January wouldn't have been considered part of fire season. But planet-warming greenhouse-gas emissions have also increased the number of days each year with fire-starter weather conditions.

On this occasion, north-east winds with gusts reaching almost 100mph (160kph) in some places swept over the mountains that cradle the city. These are the Santa Anas, also known as the "devil winds". In cooler months they blow warm, dry air from the vast desert of the Great Basin towards the coast. The winds can dry out plants already parched by the drought that has set in after two unusually wet years. But they can also carry embers great distances, breeding new fires as they blow.

It did not take long for a natural disaster to become a political one. Donald Trump blamed California's Democratic governor, Gavin Newsom, arguing that he diverted water from Californians to protect an endangered fish, a reference to a new plan to manage water in the Colorado river delta, which has no bearing on firefighting in la. "One of the best and most beautiful parts of the United States of America [is] ashes", he wrote on Truth Social, "and Gavin Newscum should resign." It is a reminder of Mr Trump's version of leadership and an ugly prelude to what will be a strained relationship between him and the governor at a time when the state will need federal assistance.

The ordeal reminds Angelenos of their vulnerability. At any given time Los Angeles is at risk of fire, flood, extreme heat, mudslides and earthquakes. "Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse" wrote Joan Didion in 1969, in an essay about the Santa Anas. The violent winds "affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are".