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Chile's forest fires partly due to poor planning, say fire chiefs

Monoculture plantations and too few fire breaks contributed to 11 deaths and devastation of 2,000 sq miles

Piotr Kozak in Santiago and Jonathan Watts

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Fire brigade chiefs said that poor preparation for climate change and large monoculture

plantations have contributed to Chile's worst forest fires in recent history, as the human, economic and environmental effects continued to grow.

Eleven people have died in the blazes, which have devastated 2,000 sq miles (more than twice the size of Hong Kong) in recent weeks.

Despite support from US and Russian supertanker aircraft and the arrival of specialist teams from other countries, the national emergency office acknowledged on Saturday that fewer than half of the 110 fires are under control.

Entire communities have been razed to the ground. Chile's capital, Santiago - which is several hundred miles away, is shrouded in haze. Firefighters are trying to prevent the flames from reaching Constitución, a town of 46,000 people.

With the blaze just two and a half miles away, local officials told the Guardian they have prepared an evacuation plan. Veronica Castillo, operational coordinator of the city's fire brigade, said the initial response would be to move part of the population across the river that bisects the town. In the "case of a complete disaster" she said, the residents would be completely evacuated with the support of the police and army.

"But we don't think that's going to happen," she said. "All the work of the firefighters right now is to keep the blaze at a safe distance from Constitución."

Elsewhere, the authorities admitted they are fighting a losing battle. "The situation right now is a fire completely out of control," said Marcelo Andres Yañez Muñoz, fire brigade commander in San Nicolás.

"All the firefighting work we did [on Saturday] was ineffective because of the [hot and windy] conditions and the type of combustible material we're dealing with - mainly forest plantations."

Like others in Chile's volunteer fire service, he appealed for more resources. Local people are donating petrol for fire trucks, as well as food and drinks. Help has also arrived from Mexico, Brazil, France and half a dozen other nations.

But those on the frontline are struggling to maintain their morale. "I get really frustrated because the situation is so extreme there's often nothing we can do except watch as the flames devour some houses we can't reach, or the fire's so intense the capacity of the fire engine's water deposit - which is between two to 5,000 litres, is just completely ineffective," said Comandante Gustavo de la Fuente Ortiz, the fire brigade chief in Chillan, a major city in the Bío Bío region.

He described how wind sometimes carries embers five miles to start new fires, particularly in areas of highly combustible eucalyptus and pine. "The plantations have appeared over the last forty years: it's much easier to control a fire in a native forest - they're more humid

and so a fire spreads more slowly.”

Given the forecasts of unusually hot weather and the long-term likelihood of drier conditions as a result of climate change, many feel the government should have taken more precautions and ensured the fire services were better prepared. At this late stage, however, the state is struggling even to provide for the thousands of people who have lost their homes.

Residents of Santa Olga - where 1,200 buildings were razed to the ground - say they have received donations of food but lack bedding.

The local fire chief, Carlos Hernandez, said the consequences would be felt for a long time to come. “It’s going to mark me for the rest of my life,” he said. “We were working, trying to put out fires in houses in the zone right to the end. And then next day, returning to Santa Olga and seeing it completely destroyed. It was as if it had been bombed to smithereens. It was an extremely painful experience.

“We’ve got to take lessons from what’s happening; keep the plantations further away from where people live - install more fire-breaks, so that what happened to Santa Olga isn’t repeated.”

. This article was amended on 2 February 2017. The fires have devastated 2,000 sq miles, not 233,000 sq miles as an earlier version said.

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