

Southern California Wildfires Test Broadcasters' Resilience

Power remains out to Mt. Wilson and Mt. Harvard, generator fuel is primary concern

BY NICK LANGAN ·

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Broadcasters across southern California have faced an exhausting week, both on the air and behind the scenes. As firefighters work to contain the Eaton and Palisades fires, engineers are working to ensure broadcast signals serving greater Los Angeles stay on the air.

Adam Hazell, regional director of station operators for Scripps Networks, provided Radio World this time lapse from Thursday, Jan. 9, of the fire approaching KPXN(TV)'s transmitter site on Mount Wilson.

Engineers Coming Together

Radio World has learned there has been frequent coordination among southern California engineers for refueling generators powering transmitters. Although Thursday's viral footage of flames caused quite a stir, the transmitters on Mount Wilson — the critical broadcast hub for L.A. — were spared harm. Power disruptions, however, remain a primary concern.

[*\[Related: "Transmission Towers at Mount Wilson Escape California Wildfires"\]*](#)

"The mountain is humming with the soothing sounds of multiple generators running," Steve Rhoades, broadcast systems specialist for L.A.'s KABC(TV), told Radio World. Rhoades was on-site at Mount Wilson several times in the last week.

Rhoades said power remains disconnected as per Southern California Edison's "Public Safety Power Shutoff" protocols, which are typically implemented during high-wind events. SCE warned to "prepare for extended outages."

Dennis Doty, RF engineer for KNBC(TV) in L.A., explained that inspections of Southern California Edison's supply lines to Mount Wilson and Mount Harvard must wait until the winds subside.

He said an inspection on the Mount Wilson side of the power infrastructure will also have to be conducted, including disconnection of any damaged infrastructure, which will take time.



A structure damaged on Mount Wilson by the Eaton Fire. Photo courtesy of Steve Rhoades, KABC(TV) broadcast systems specialist.

One building was destroyed in the Wilson fire, which was a pager site at the south end of Mount Wilson, according to Rhoades.

“Other fires I recall have been stopped short of the broadcast complex, making this fire unique and a good test of fire preparedness,” engineering consultant and Radio World contributor Bob Gonsett said. He added one of the big upcoming events for broadcast engineers will be cleaning the soot out of their heat exchangers and sometimes the transmitters themselves depending on how cooling is achieved.

Mount Harvard Impacts

Please Pardon the Interruption: Reduced Signal on 91.5 FM



Due to the Eaton Fire, 91.5 FM is broadcasting at reduced power. As a result, you may notice a weaker signal in some areas. Our engineers are closely monitoring the situation and hope to restore full power as soon as possible. In the meantime, you can explore other ways to listen [here](#).

A reduced signal alert on 91.5 KUSC(FM)'s website.

Mount Harvard is the sister site to Mount Wilson, about a mile south. The University of Southern California's 91.5 KUSC(FM) and Franken-FM 87.7 KZNO(LD) "Guadalupe Radio," broadcast from Harvard. Harvard sits at a slightly lower height above ground level, about 5,500-feet versus Wilson's approximately 5,700-feet elevation.

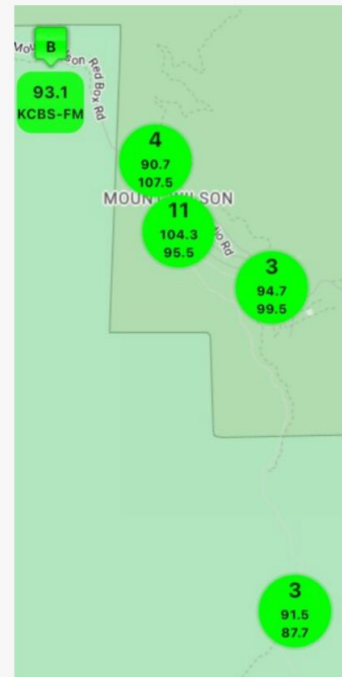
Ron Thompson, KUSC's director of engineering, confirmed that some transmitter-to-tower lines were damaged by the fire. As of Monday afternoon local time, the station was back broadcasting from Harvard on reduced power. The station maintains an auxiliary site on Lookout Mountain in Hollywood Hills, but Thompson says the signal coverage is quite reduced there due to previous impacts from wind and rain events.

Thompson told Radio World that there are three broadcast towers on Mount Harvard. American Tower is the site owner and it operates two self-supporting towers. KUSC has the third tower to itself. Thompson is awaiting a tower crew inspection, which he is hoping will be conducted Tuesday. It is a guyed tower, so to return to full power, first it needs to be determined to be structurally sound.

Thompson said that following the 2009 DTV transition, many TV tenants vacated Mount Harvard, so power demand is not as high as the crowded Wilson. He said American Tower, which operates the generators at the site, had a fuel delivery Friday Night.

Doug Lung, VP of broadcast technology for NBCUniversal Local, told Radio World's sister publication, TV Tech last Thursday, that KSCI(TV), KWHY(TV) and KOCE(TV), all transmitting from Mount Harvard, appeared to be off-the-air, detected via one of the [RabbitEars.Info live bandscan sites](#). The stations have since restored over-the-air signals.

"There are two power paths to Mount Wilson," Lung explained. "One runs through the Eaton fire area to Mount Harvard and then to Mount Wilson. The other comes from the north, away from the fire. The power company may have shut it down to prevent the lines from sparking



The FM stations on Mount Wilson are at the top of the map, while Mount Harvard's are to the south at the bottom, including 91.5 KUSC(FM). From the RadioLand app.

new fires during high winds.”

Lung also warned that smaller fuel tanks could lead to stations going off-air if refueling is delayed. “Fuel truck drivers won’t drive through active fires, but once things are under control, they should be able to make deliveries,” he added.

The Broadcasters Foundation of America [is offering financial assistance grants to radio and television professionals impacted by the wildfires.](#)



A melted electric meter box at Mount Wilson. Photo courtesy of Steve Rhoades, KABC(TV) broadcast systems specialist.

That the fire did not cause more harm to the broadcast infrastructure is a testament to prior preparation by SoCal engineers. Gonsett suggests there are many success stories to be shared, including on the essentials of weed abatement, tree trimming and hardening of structures against flying embers.

But the next week may still include many challenges ahead. KUSC’s Thompson said he is in the process of coordinating a separate auxiliary site with another southern California broadcaster which does not suffer from the power grid concerns as Mount Harvard and is not prone to mudslides like the Hollywood Hills.

FCC Deploys Spectrum Survey Teams

FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel said in a statement released Monday that the commission has deployed its spectrum survey teams, at the request of FEMA and California officials, to assess cellular impact in Los Angeles County. They are also working to identify other communications gaps which will inform emergency response activities. She added that STAs are being issued to keep communications operating.

“While communications outages remain minimal, the FCC will continue to closely monitor developments and do whatever we can to help ensure that residents and first responders are able to communicate and stay informed during this crisis,” said Rosenworcel.

Concerns for Ventura County

Particularly Dangerous Situation (PDS) Red Flag Warnings

EXTREME RISK – Take Immediate Action

*****2 PDS Areas*****

- **PDS Timing: Tuesday 4AM - 12pm Wednesday**
- **Do NOT do anything that could spark a fire**
- **Have multiple ways to receive evacuation information**
- **Visit www.fire.ca.gov/prepare; Develop a wildfire action plan**
- **Peak winds for this next event will be weaker than those last week. Nevertheless, winds will be strong enough to potentially cause explosive fire growth**

Weather: 45-70 mph gusts, locally damaging; 8-15% relative humidity

***** Important: Red Flag conditions (though weaker winds) are expected in other areas of Southern California *****

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Updated: Monday January 13, 2025 at 10:00 am

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As of Monday morning, [the Eaton Fire was 27% contained](#), according to KABC(TV). The Storm Prediction Center on Monday issued a “particularly dangerous situation” red flag warning – the highest-level alert the agency is capable of issuing – for parts of Los Angeles and Ventura counties. The center warned that extremely critical fire conditions “may develop in the Ventura Valley to the San Bernardino Mountains.”



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