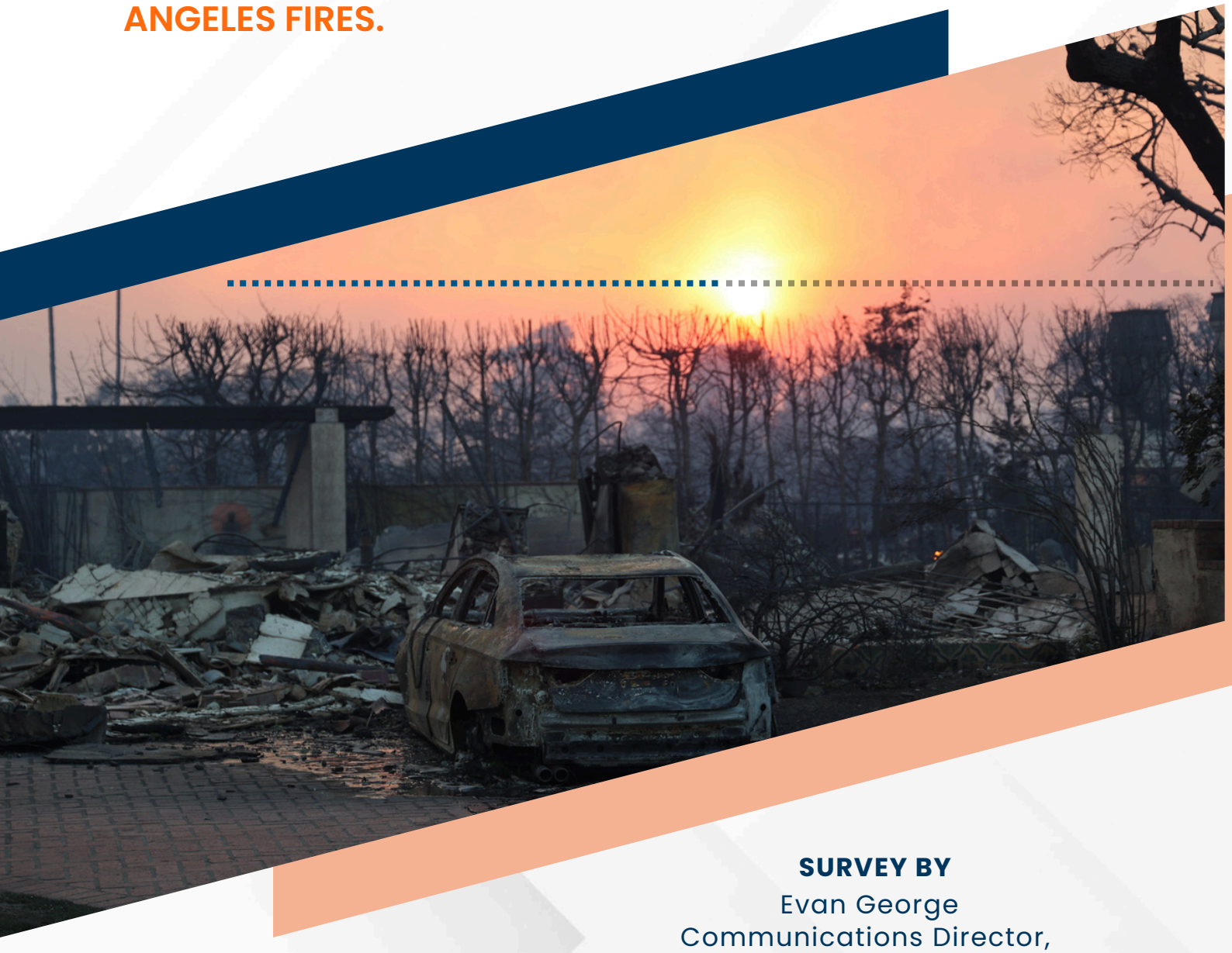
UCLA School of Law
Emmett Institute on Climate Change & the Environment

MISSED CONNECTIONS

CLIMATE CHANGE WAS MISSING FROM *LA TIMES* COVERAGE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2025 LOS ANGELES FIRES.



SURVEY BY
Evan George
Communications Director,
UCLA Emmett Institute

RESEARCH ASSISTANCE
Valery Reyes

Top Takeaway

Only 14% of stories in *The Los Angeles Times* about the Eaton and Palisades fires mentioned the role of climate change in the first two months of coverage.

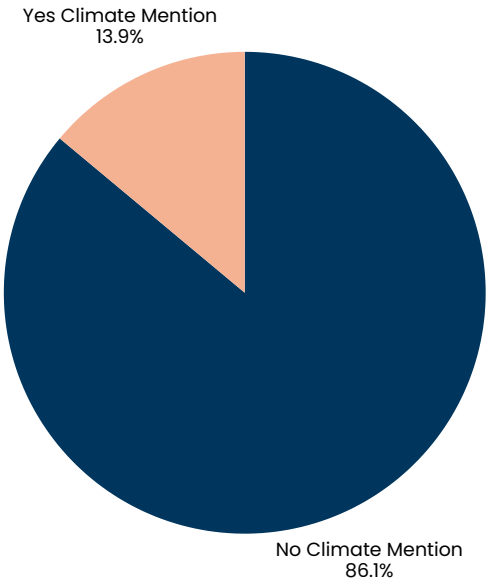
The catastrophic January firestorms that ravaged Altadena and the Pacific Palisades dominated global headlines for days and led the news in Southern California for months. One of many reasons that newsrooms deemed these urban conflagrations so newsworthy was because they were abnormal: a pair of mega fires bigger, deadlier, costlier, and earlier in the year than we are used to in Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles Times, which has previously won Pulitzer Prizes for wildfire coverage and invested in a robust "Climate & Environment" section, covered the Eaton and Palisades fires tirelessly from a variety of angles. However, few articles drew any connection between the fires and climate change. This despite strong scientific consensus that human-caused climate change is one factor driving California's increasingly intense wildfires.

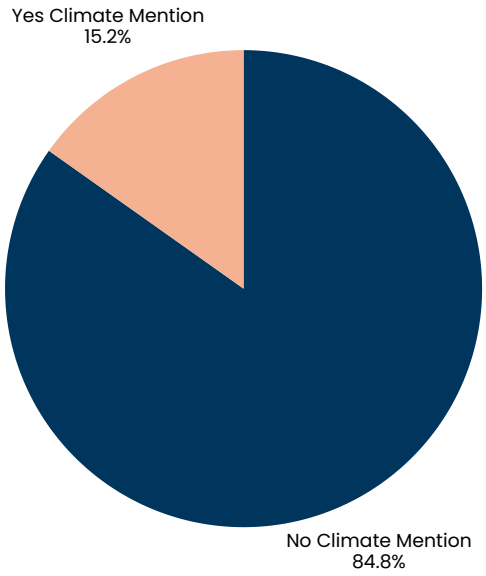
For this survey, the Emmett Institute reviewed coverage by *The Los Angeles Times* from January 7 to the end of February. The survey found that only 14% of stories and video segments made any mention of "climate change" or "global warming." This survey included 610 digital stories that touched on the Eaton and Palisades fires (531 stories in January and 79 stories in February). Of that total, 74 stories in January mentioned climate change (13.9%) while in February, 12 stories included a climate mention (15.2%). When excluding opinion articles and editorials, the percentage remained virtually unchanged: 13% of news stories mentioned climate.

Not every piece of content related to wildfires can mention climate change. For example, short news briefs typically do not provide context beyond the immediate news development. So, survey methods were undertaken to account for this reasonable limitation.

January



February



We searched *The Los Angeles Times* archive via the website's chronological Site Map to turn up all stories with a connection to the January fires. Then we excluded certain content from the survey: all Letters to the Editor as well as news stories focused on looting, policing, event cancellations, or fire evacuations where there was no obvious segue to discuss climate change, such as a mention of the extreme weather conditions, underlying causes, calls for accountability, legislation or other possible solutions. At least 187 stories that touched on the fires were *excluded* from the survey using these criteria. If these stories had been included, the percentage would have been even lower than 14%.

This climate blind spot is illustrative of a much bigger media problem. Most news coverage in general did not draw the connection between climate change and the LA fires. Previous reports have focused on national broadcast and cable news coverage. Only 6% of segments and weathercasts about the wildfires across TV news mentioned the role of climate change from January 7-9, according to Media Matters.

This survey focused on *The Los Angeles Times* because the outlet remains a regional leader in breaking news, especially wildfire coverage, that other outlets follow. *The LA Times* also serves as a source of information and education to Southern California residents, frequently dropping its paywall for wildfire coverage, as it did in January 2025 when public interest in coverage was at its peak.

To be sure, climate change was not totally absent from the pages of newspapers like *The Los Angeles Times*. The quantity of climate coverage rose in January 2025, increasing 74% from the January before in several US newspapers, according to the Media and Climate Change Observatory at the University of Colorado Boulder (MeCCO).

In the *LA Times* specifically, mentions of "climate change" and "global warming" were up 100% in January 2025 over the January before, according to MeCCO. Researchers attributed this increase in media attention to "a combination of devastating wildfires in the Los Angeles – with connections made to climate change or global warming – and the climate policy implications of the incoming Trump Administration."

Despite that increase in total mentions, relatively few wildfire stories connected the dots.

Climate Need Not Be Relegated to the 'Climate' Section

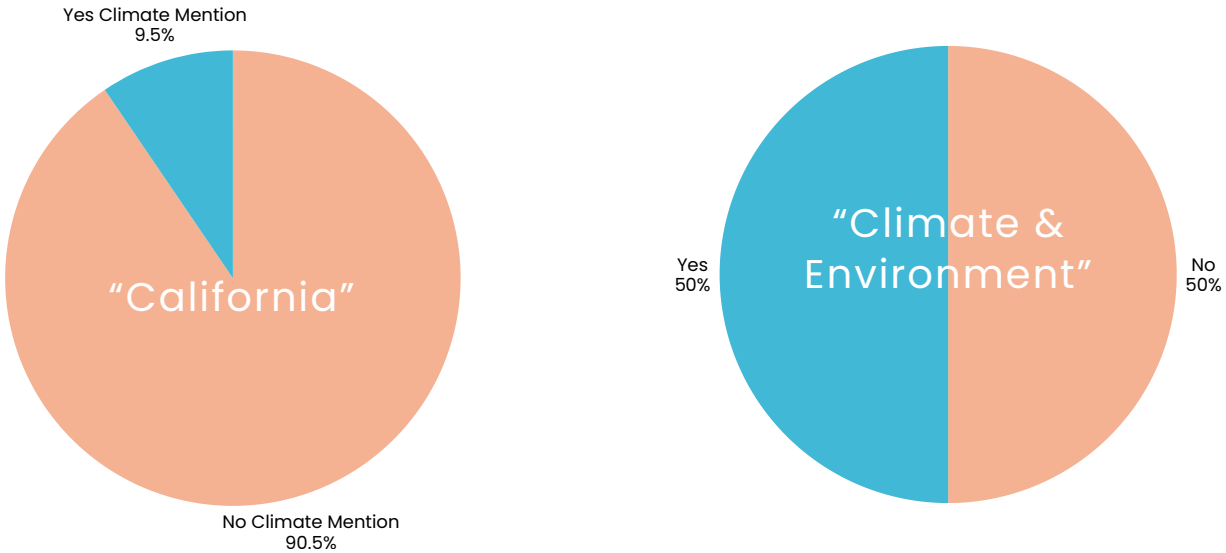
The first firestorm story published at *latimes.com* to mention climate was a breaking news post on January 7 (*"Dangerous winds prompt Southern California Edison to shut off power to thousands of customers. Here's where."*) This story included a source quote situating the weather conditions in a climate change context — one easy way to mention climate. In fact, many *LA Times* stories that mentioned climate change did so only in source quotes (i.e. in the words of a climate scientist or other expert being quoted) not in the reporter's own voice.

There was a big difference between sections of the paper. Many of the stories about the Eaton and Palisades fires during this two-month period came under the banner of the "California" section, which houses the paper's City Desk, State Bureaus, Sacramento Bureau and other departments. Of 263 "California" stories in January, just 25 included a climate mention — 9% of stories.

A January 12 "California" article titled *"Power lines? Old embers? Arson? Investigators, experts, amateurs look for cause of L.A. fires"* is an example of a story that explored "a slew of potential factors" and causes — but not climate change. The result is a deeply reported narrative about accountability and future prevention that misses one important piece of context. Many other articles reviewed for this survey focused on investigating the conduct of public utilities, local fire departments, city and county officials, but without mentioning climate. A January 14 story titled *"Eaton Fire: Inside the Chaotic First Hours"* described at length the extraordinary nature of the firestorm and how it grounded fire-fighting aircraft, but with no connection between extreme weather and climate change.

The percentage of climate mentions was significantly higher in the "Climate & Environment" section, where 50% (12 out of 24) stories published in January mentioned climate change. One January 9 article from "Climate & Environment" titled *"Why hydrants ran dry as firefighters battled California's deadly fires"* focused on the limitations of local water systems when battling large fires, yet the reporters also made the climate change connection, writing that "research has shown that these abrupt wet-to-dry swings are growing more frequent and intense because of human-caused climate change."

January By Section



Strong Scientific Consensus that Climate Change is a Factor

While it takes time and extensive research to fully understand the confluence of factors that contribute to these kinds of disasters, there is strong scientific consensus that climate change is one of those factors. The most lethal and costly wildfires are blazing four times more often now than they did in the 1980s because of human-caused climate change and, importantly, because people have moved closer to wildlands, according to a study in the journal *Science*. That study, one of the most recent to analyze "climate-linked escalation" of disastrous wildfires, found that more than 40% of the world's costliest wildfires have occurred in the last decade.

In the case of the January fires, there was broad scientific consensus even within the first week that "climate whiplash" played a role in the extreme conditions: Previous wet winters led to a buildup of fuels; a very warm summer in 2024 dried out the vegetation; and then a nearly unprecedented Santa Ana wind event fueled rapid spread of the wildfires that sparked on January 7. One UCLA study published on January 13 found that "climate change may be linked to roughly a quarter of the extreme fuel moisture deficit when the fires began." Another study by World Weather Attribution published on January 28, concluded that the hot, dry and windy conditions that drove the fires were about 35% more likely and 6% more intense due to human-caused climate change. A more recent UCLA study finds that human-caused climate change is indeed responsible for larger wildfires earlier in the year — accounting for a six-to-46-day earlier start to fire season in California.

Consider the Feb. 25 *LA Times* article titled *"California wildfires are burning deeper into urban areas like Altadena and finding new victims"* focused on California's "increasingly destructive urban wildfires." The reporters relied on a 2023 study of California wildfires conducted by U.S. Forest Service researchers that found "new fire regimes are increasingly affecting more urban census tracts statewide."

What is driving these new fire regimes, you might ask? The Forest Service study repeatedly mentions the contribution of climate change — the *LA Times* article fails to mention it once.

Extreme Weather Disasters May Be Teachable Moments

As climate-fueled disasters become more frequent and intense, they are seen as important "teachable moments" for informing the public. This is why one week into the disaster, co-founders of the influential media organization Covering Climate Now declared the fires a "seminal moment for the climate crisis – and journalism." That organization led a January 14 webinar on "climate change's role on the risk factors that led to the Southern California blazes." As they note, drawing the climate connection can be done in one sentence – or less. Their tipsheets for reporters even suggest a variety of sample language for making the connection, such as "Human-caused climate change isn't solely to blame for extreme weather, but it supercharges normal weather patterns, like steroids."

If extreme weather events are teachable moments, U.S. media outlets do not seem to be meeting that moment. Americans tell pollsters they rarely see news about climate change. For instance, only 37% of Americans say they hear about global warming in the media once a month, according to a Spring 2025 report from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

News coverage of climate change plays an important role in influencing public understanding, risk perception, and behavioral intentions regarding climate issues, according to the growing field of research around climate change media studies. For decades now, researchers have examined how news coverage, and industry misinformation, portrayed climate science as uncertain or controversial. Studies have shown that global coverage of climate change has increased dramatically since the 1990s. However, coverage of climate change at the US national level has actually decreased since 2021. For instance, 2024 levels in print coverage from major newspapers ranked 6th, while 2024 levels in television coverage ranked 12th in the 25 years of monitoring done by MeCCO, which summarizes its findings in monthly and annual reports.

Recently, some social science researchers have examined the connection between the experience of extreme weather events and support for climate policies. A July 2025 global study in the journal *Nature* found evidence that exposure to extreme weather that was attributed to climate change was "positively associated with policy support for five widely discussed climate policies." In other words, when individuals make the connection between extreme weather events and climate change, their support for climate policies is stronger.

We also know that a vast majority of Americans (69%) recognize that global warming is occurring and yet most say they have not personally experienced the effects of climate change. A 2023 report from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication found that 43% of Americans agree with the statement "I have personally experienced the effects of global warming," but that a majority of Americans (56%) disagree with that statement. How are disaster survivors to know about the role climate change played in an extreme weather event if scientific understanding is not reliably included in published reports?

Conclusion

This survey shows climate change was missing from the majority of *LA Times* stories covering the 2025 Los Angeles fires (86%) during the first two months, when public interest was highest. While this review focused on January and February, these missed connections continued throughout 2025 and can be seen in some of *The LA Times*' enterprise investigations. That includes a July 23 investigative story that used vehicle locator data to demonstrate that most LA County fire trucks did not shift into west Altadena after the conflagration erupted in that area. The story used GPS coordinates to pinpoint every time a fire truck stopped, analyzed county decision-making, and made passing reference to the "unprecedented" firestorm, but did not mention the role of human-caused climate change.

The findings highlight the fact that climate-fueled disasters are often covered by journalists with no specialization in climate change. As such, climate science communicators who send PR pitches, expert explainers, and training materials during disasters should target news assignment desks as well as environmental reporters.

The journalists and photojournalists of *The Los Angeles Times* have been rightfully recognized for excellence in reporting on wildfires — including the breaking news coverage and feature reporting around the January fires. This survey suggests there is room for improvement in how the largest newsroom on the West Coast informs its audience about climate change's role in extreme weather events that, unfortunately, will continue to wreak havoc on Southern California.

This survey was conducted by Evan George with assistance from student researcher Valery Reyes. The views expressed are solely those of the author, as are any errors. Cover photo by CAL FIRE.