

California wildfire insurance claims top \$3.3 billion

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Property damage claims from a series of deadly October wildfires now exceed \$3.3 billion, California Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones said Tuesday.

The figure represents claims for homes and businesses insured by 15 companies and is more than triple the previous estimate of \$1 billion. Jones said the number will continue to rise as more claims are reported.

The amount of claims now reported means that the fires caused more damage than California's 1991 Oakland Hills fire, which was previously the state's costliest, with \$2.7 billion in damages in 2015 dollars, according to the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America.

Forty-three people were killed in the October blazes that tore through Northern California, including the state's renowned winemaking regions in Napa and Sonoma counties. They destroyed thousands of buildings as more than 100,000 people were forced to evacuate. It was the deadliest series of fires in California history.

The fires are now nearly contained.

Facebook, Twitter, Google defend their security measures

As revelations emerged that Russian-linked accounts reached many more American voters than previously thought, tech giants Facebook, Twitter and Google on Tuesday defended their security measures and promised a Senate subcommittee they would do more to stop the misuse of their



In this Oct. 14 file photo, an aerial view shows the devastation of the Coffey Park neighborhood after a wildfire swept through in Santa Rosa, Calif.

platforms by foreign nations.

Lawyers for the three companies acknowledged to U.S. lawmakers that Russian-linked accounts began exploiting their services in 2015 to sway last year's presidential election.

They also said the abuses continued after President Donald Trump took office, in an attempt to deepen divisions in the country.

The admissions came Tuesday during appearances before a Senate subcommittee looking into Russia's manipulation of influential communication channels to interfere in the 2016 election. The mischief came through advertising purchased on the services and posts containing misleading or false information.

All three companies vowed to

do a better job preventing similar interference from Russia and other "bad actors" in the future.

Early on, Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said the purpose of the hearing was for the government to "figure out how we can help" the tech companies. But in the second hour of the meeting, Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont said he'd been hearing a lot of "Johnny-come-latelies" from the companies when they could have done something earlier.

Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar, meanwhile, pressed the companies to declare whether they will support the "Honest Ads" bill she has introduced with Sen. Mark Warner, which would bring political ad rules from TV, radio and print to the internet.

Each of the tech giants offered qualified support rather than answering "yes."

"We stand ready to work with you and your co-sponsors on that legislation going forward," said Facebook general counsel Colin Stretch, who was echoed by Twitter and Google.

Trump administration to defend Cuba embargo at UN

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration will defend America's decades-old economic embargo on Cuba in a United Nations vote this week, the State Department said Tuesday, in a reversal from the

Obama administration that reflects deteriorating U.S.-Cuban relations.

Every year the U.N. votes to condemn the embargo, and for years the U.S. predictably voted "no." But last year, under President Barack Obama, the U.S. abstained for the first time, as Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro moved forward with the historic warming of relations.

A "no" vote Wednesday from U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley will return the United States to a place of extreme isolation within the global community over its policy toward Cuba, potentially undermining the Trump administration's broader goals for engagement with Latin America. The U.S. embargo on Cuba is almost universally opposed throughout the world.

The vote comes as an ongoing crisis over U.S. government workers in Havana harmed by invisible "health attacks" has created a new rift between the U.S. and Cuba, putting the restoration of ties in jeopardy. State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert did not mention the attacks in announcing the "no" vote, instead emphasizing the need to promote rights and democracy in Cuba.

"For far too long, Cuba has engaged in human rights abuses — human rights abuses that perhaps past administrations have turned and looked the other way," Nauert said. Still, she said the U.S. would continue pursuing engagement with the island that advances American interests.

Proponents of improved ties with Cuba had urged the Trump administration to abstain instead of voting "no." In a letter to President Donald Trump on Tuesday, 10 Democratic senators said U.S. international credibility would suffer if it continued pushing an "outdated" policy seen as harmful to the Cuban people.

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