

'It's pandemonium': virus panic-buying hits Los Angeles

March 7 2020

Sprinting shoppers, rationed mineral water and not a roll of toilet paper to be seen: panic-buying sparked by the new coronavirus soared in Los Angeles this week.

Two days after California declared a statewide emergency, wholesale stores visited by AFP on Friday were unable to keep up with soaring demand for a range of staple items, as citizens prepare for the worst.

"It's pandemonium—our numbers are double the usual," said Rene, an employee at a Costco supermarket in Burbank.

"Today has been out of control. That's why we're out of [toilet paper](#), out of almost all [water](#), out of hand sanitizer."

One person has died so far in California, which as of Friday had registered 69 coronavirus cases—second in the US only to nearby Washington state.

Despite officials' pleas for restraint, Californians have begun emulating the panic-buying seen across swathes of Asia and other regions.

"It's been nuts," Costco CFO Richard Galanti told analysts on a call Thursday.

The same day, police in San Bernardino County, near Los Angeles, were called to one store after customers became enraged by the lack of

supplies.

On Friday, Costco shoppers were restricted to two crates of water, down from four the previous day.

Several tried to ignore the rule and saw their extra waters confiscated at checkout, leading to "some pushing, a little bit," an attendant said.

A worker wheeling an overloaded cart of confiscated bottles back to their shelf was repeatedly stopped by new customers grabbing what they could.

Even Costco's famous free food samples had been suspended for fear of spreading the virus, another employee confirmed.

"With the madness here, it's starting to really set in," said Lisa Garcia, a 30-year-old retail worker who admitted she was growing seriously worried.

"We were thinking of stocking up on [paper products](#), but look at those empty shelves!" she told AFP.

At another nearby branch, employees reported shoppers dashing at full pace through the doors as the store opened, desperate to grab supplies.

By midday, only expensive sparkling Perrier bottles remained, to the disappointment of several shoppers.

But some shoppers, though concerned, managed to see the lighter side of the situation.

"I'm guarded," said emergency responder Andrew, who did not want to give his last name, wheeling a trolley filled with water, paper towels,

limes and ginger ale.

"I want to make sure we have the essentials—some mixers, some wines, you know, so if things go bad I can make a drink."

"I'm here just in case the apocalypse is going to happen," joked Carlos Gonzalez, a 35-year-old student.

"I guess they've found a good way to sell a lot of stuff."

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