

2007

FIRE SIEGE

OVERVIEW

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On Saturday, Oct. 20, 2007 at 9:42 p.m., a small wildfire was reported along Interstate 5 six miles north of Castaic in Los Angeles County. Driven by strong winds the blaze quickly grew to 12,000 acres by Sunday morning. The fire on the Angeles National Forest was just the beginning of what would turn out to be one of the most devastating fire sieges in history.

Up until October, the California fire season had been relatively light. In fact, prior to October, California's wildfire season was well below the five-year average for number of wildfires and the number of acres burned. As of Oct. 1, 2007, only 6,574 wildfires had burned in CAL FIRE's jurisdiction with 84,429 acres burned. Compared to 2006 for the same time period there were 7,654 wildfires burning 212,429 acres.

Fairly seasonable conditions were seen throughout the region during the middle of October. That all changed as forecasters started to predict a strong offshore flow beginning on Oct. 21. CAL FIRE and other Southern California fire departments began to increase staffing and pre-position fire equipment throughout the Southland.

By daybreak on Sunday, numerous wildfires had sparked across Southern California. The combination of strong winds, single digit humidity levels, and dry conditions, created the perfect recipe for a major disaster. Fueled by dry vegetation and fanned by 20 to 40 mph Santa Ana Winds, firefighters quickly began to battle a raging inferno.

As the Ranch Fire on the Angeles National Forest began to spot ahead of itself and threaten Ventura County and the community of Piru, Los Angeles County firefighters began to fight their own battle, as the Canyon Fire ripped through the coastal community of Malibu. Just hours after the Canyon Fire first started, a new fire was



reported further south in San Diego County near the U.S.-Mexico border. The Harris Fire quickly engulfed the Potrero area and brought reports of possible fatalities and injuries. Included in the numerous injuries that day was a crew from the San Diego Unit on the Harris Fire.

All four crew members were airlifted to an area hospital in critical condition. About forty miles north of the Harris Fire, the Witch Fire was reported around noon, east of Ramona. At the end of day two of the siege, nearly 4,000 firefighters were battling eight major wildfires, which had burned over 33,000 acres.

As the sun rose on Monday, so did the Santa Ana wind gusts and high temperatures. Weather stations reported winds over 70 mph. By dawn, three new large fires had been reported as more firefighters poured into the region from across the state. Even with the onslaught of more ground resources, the wind forced most aircraft to be grounded throughout the day. Safety standards do not allow aircraft

to fly if winds exceed 30 mph. The 70+ mph winds that day hampered air efforts.

With the erratic fire behavior continuing to threaten homes, a massive evacuation was underway for thousands of residents. A fire even forced the evacuation of the Magic Mountain Theme Park. As thousands left their homes and belongings to get out of harm's way, evacuation shelters began to open all across the region. The San Diego Chargers even moved out of Qualcomm Stadium to allow displaced residents a place to go. By nightfall of day three of the siege, roughly 6,500 firefighters and over 880 fire engines battled 13 major wildfires, which had burned nearly 270,000 acres.

Winds let up a little on Tuesday, but still posed a major threat with sustained speeds of 25 mph and gusts up to the mid 40s. Santa Ana conditions continued as a new fire was reported on the La Jolla Indian Reservation in Northern San Diego County. Smoke and weather conditions continued to make air operations difficult

and dangerous forcing aircrafts to be used sporadically when winds briefly calmed down. As day four came to an end, over 8,400 firefighters and 1,000 fire engines were fighting 14 major wildfires, which had charred over 410,000 acres.

On Wednesday, it appeared as if the wind event was beginning to subside. Many of the large fires reported moderate behavior allowing crews to aggressively attack the flames. However, forecasters anticipated a change in wind direction to a more normal on-shore flow. This would bring the potential to adversely affect the fires by causing them to grow in the opposite direction. Evacuations remained in place throughout Southern California as crews now began to battle the wind shift. Day five saw good progress as 10,750 firefighters contained a number of fires leaving ten fires actively burning over 460,000 acres.

On Thursday, the temperatures remained above normal and humidity levels low, the wind pattern began to return to a normal flow with wind speeds under 20 mph. Great progress was made, though incident commanders did not become complacent over the dangers with the recent wind shift. With more stable winds, firefighters were able to successfully use



firing operations to tie containment lines together. As the sun set on day six, there were over 11,785 firefighters assigned to the siege. Firefighters made good progress on nine fires which blackened over 487,000 acres.

Throughout the next couple of days, cooler temperatures and reduced wind activity provided more cooperative conditions for firefighting. It was not until early November that the last of the raging wildfires were fully contained. As the smoke dissipated it became clear, the fire siege of 2007 would go down in history as one of the largest natural disasters in California history. During the week of Oct. 20, 2007 there were over 250 reported new wildfires in Southern California. Firefighters were kept busy for a couple of weeks, but out of all the initial attack fires, only 17 of them grew to large extended attack fires, which charred just over 510,000 acres.

California law enforcement helped evacuate nearly one million residents. This was the largest mass evacuation in California history. Sadly, 17 people lost their lives from the fire siege. Ten people were killed directly by the fires, three died while evacuating and four people perished as a result of the strain and stress the wildfires brought. More than 100 firefighters were injured, including four from CAL FIRE who were injured in a fire engine burn over.

Even though the 2007 fire siege saw more major wildfires than the 2003 siege, California's firefighters did a tremendous job. There were nine more significant wildfires than 2003, but 367,224 fewer acres burned, 1,477 less homes were lost and 14 less people lost their lives. The firefighting during the 2007 siege once again proved that California is second to none in battling wildfires.

