

Aftermath

The fire siege of October 2007 will be known for the speed of its evolution.

On October 21, the first day of the siege, the Harris Fire in the southern part of San Diego County killed one resident, severely burned another and burned over a fire engine, requiring the crew to be airlifted to safety.

That same morning, 40 miles north of the Harris Fire, the Witch Fire began in the Witch Creek area. By noon it had charred 8,000 acres and was advancing into the same area that had been devastated by the Cedar Fire in 2003. Meanwhile, the Harris Fire had already burned 20,000 acres and was still growing.



A homeowner is rewarded for pre-fire preparation. While some neighboring homes were destroyed, the defensible space around this home aided in its survival.

From the very beginning, these fires were propelled by Santa Ana winds, clocked as high as 90 miles per hour. One gust on Laguna Peak north of Los Angeles was clocked at 112 miles per hour. Air tankers and helicopters were ineffective in the heavy winds, and at times were unable to fly in these extraordinarily adverse conditions.

By dawn of October 22, barely one day into the siege, new fires had ignited in Fallbrook, San Marcos and near the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Twenty thousand homes were without power. Qualcomm Stadium had opened as an evacuation center, and officials there were preparing for as many as 100,000 evacuees. By noon, October 22, the Witch Fire had jumped Interstate-15 and was burning in Poway. San Diego businesses, government offices, and schools began closing.

Soon, 17 significant fires and dozens of smaller ones were burning from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border. Major highways and surface streets were closed to traffic as residents began what would become the largest evacuation in California history. Officials believe as many as 900,000 people were displaced at the height of the emergency.

California Fire Siege Aftermath

If the rapid advancement of the fires was the news headline, then evacuation was the common theme. Hundreds of thousands of people moved out of the fire areas into hotels and evacuation centers. Many slept in their cars on the side of the road. Hundreds of people brought their pets with them.

These fires occurred in horse country, and many evacuees were moving livestock. People loaded up their horse trailers and headed to nearby fairgrounds hoping to find safe, empty stalls.

Governor Schwarzenegger visited several areas the evening of the second day, promising help to the displaced residents and calling for military support for the firefighters. California declared a state of emergency, and in Washington, D.C., President Bush declared a national disaster area.

The smoky haze from the fires was visible from space and health officials expressed concern about respiratory problems. State and local public health officials visited the evacuation centers and offered free flu shots. Mental health officials began to monitor the toll that stress was having on the emotional health of the evacuees, especially children who weren't able to go to school. Information on coping with disasters was widely distributed.

Some of the most emotional moments seemed to come when residents were allowed back into their neighborhoods only to see their homes in ruins.

Seventeen people lost their lives as a result of the siege. Ten were killed by the fires outright, three were killed while evacuating, and four died from other fire siege related causes. Though none were killed, more than 100 firefighters were injured. Of these, four were very seriously injured and two will require lengthy rehabilitation.

Although the fires of October 2003 were the worst fire siege in California's history, the effective response to the Fire Siege of 2007 set the record for the number of people who were safely evacuated and cared for by emergency responders and volunteers.

Considering the destruction of the fires, the disruption of people's lives, the damage to health and the loss of business and tourism, ultimately millions of people were impacted by these fires, directly or indirectly. Those impacts will be felt for years to come.



Given the scope of the siege, investigation, damage assessment and rehabilitation of wildlands will continue for years.