

Introduction

In late October 2007, Southern California experienced an unusually severe fire weather event characterized by intense, dry, gusty Santa Ana winds. This weather event drove a series of destructive wildfires that took a devastating toll on people, property, natural resources, and infrastructure. Although some fires burned into early November, the heaviest damage occurred during the first three days of the siege while the winds were the strongest.

During this siege, 17 people lost their lives, 10 were killed by the fires outright, three were killed while evacuating, four died from other fire siege related causes, and 140 firefighters and an unknown number of civilians were injured. A total of 3,069 homes and other buildings were destroyed, and hundreds more were damaged. Hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated at the height of the siege. The fires burned over half a million acres, including populated areas, wildlife habitat and watershed. Portions of the electrical power distribution network, telecommunications systems, and even some community water sources were destroyed. Transportation was disrupted over a large area for several days, including numerous road closures. Both the Governor of California and the President of the United States personally toured the ongoing fires. Governor Schwarzenegger proclaimed a state of emergency in seven counties before the end of the first day. President Bush quickly declared a major disaster. While the total impact of the 2007 fire siege was less than the disastrous fires of 2003, it was unquestionably one of the most devastating wildfire events in the history of California.



An untouched home in the background stands in contrast to the destruction of neighboring properties.

Purpose

This report provides a broad, factual overview of the fire siege, documenting key events, providing summary statistics and serving as a reference for other reviews, investigations, studies and reports.

While firefighters gained control of the fires, a team of state and federal fire specialists gathered information to develop this factual report to recount the collective response of various organizations to the siege. The team has attempted to present the complexities of managing a large fire siege, and has included a broad array of information. The report provides detailed information about the day-to-day tactical firefighting effort, as well as the numerous social and political considerations that influenced strategic decisions.

This report is not an in-depth analysis and assessment of specific fire events, as these issues will be addressed in other efforts that will continue for several years.



The Contents

Fire Events and Policy includes a synopsis of significant large and damaging wildfires in California since 1923. It describes some key public policy actions establishing the multi-agency firefighting organization in place during this siege. It places a special emphasis on relevant activities and events that took place from 2004 through 2006.

The Prelude to the Siege describes events that took place during the year prior to the fire siege. It emphasizes major fires and the development of conditions that increased the magnitude of the October wildfires beyond what normally would have been expected.

Meteorological Events Timeline and Preparation recounts the six days leading up to the siege detailing the developing fire weather conditions, and actions taken by state and federal wildland fire agencies and local fire departments to prepare for the possibility of a major fire event.

The Fires provides a daily chronology written from the perspective of a fire chief working at a regional scale. Each day is a snapshot of the complex and rapidly changing fire environment, including weather, fire location and size, firefighting resource commitments, and public safety and evacuation impacts, that influence regional strategic decisions. The daily chronology follows specific fire activity, detailing the efforts of firefighters suppressing major fires while continuously responding to new outbreaks. It also describes the human and environmental impacts of the fires, including evacuations, structures damaged and destroyed, and damage to critical watershed and natural resources.

The Epilogue describes the continuation of the 2007 fire season into late November, placing it into the fire season as a whole, making the important point that the fire season did not end when the siege was over.

Fire Siege Coordination highlights examples of strategic regional coordination of several management systems and technologies.

The Aftermath summarizes the October fire siege, placing it into the context of both the 2007 fire season, and wildfire history.

The Appendices include summary statistics for the siege, maps and descriptions of the fires by incident, a brief description of evacuations, a list of some after-action reports, copies of key advisories, proclamations, and declarations.

Glossary of Terms, and ***Acknowledgements*** of those responsible for producing the report.