

# THE SACRAMENTO BEE

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## **350,000 flee firestorm**

*Seven separate blazes in San Diego*

***By Todd Milbourn, Ryan Lillis, Dorothy Korber and Carrie Peyton Dahlberg***

SAN DIEGO -- An explosive chain of Southern California wildfires has triggered the largest evacuation in state history, with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing their homes as weary firefighters struggle to slow the relentless infernos that have consumed more than 267,000 acres since last weekend.

In San Diego County alone, seven separate fires spurred the evacuation of 300,000 people -- 10 percent of the county's population.

"There's been a mass exodus," said Luis Monteagudo, a spokesman for the county. "Some roads are gridlocked. Emotions are on edge. We are going through something unprecedented at this point."

Fire officials estimated that 500 homes and 100 businesses had been destroyed in San Diego County's Witch fire, which had charred 145,000 acres as of Monday night.

Throughout the Southern California fire zone, one death was confirmed and 39 people were injured, including 15 firefighters.

The number of evacuees far exceeds California's previous record, when 120,000 people were displaced in Northern California during the 1997 floods.

Across the south state, at least 14 fires rampaged through seven counties. Fanned by ferocious winds and feeding on vegetation parched by drought, the fires on Monday blazed from the mountains to the sea.

Today's prospects don't look much better, with sustained winds of 20 to 30 mph, gusting up to 80 mph, said Mike Sicilia, an Office of Emergency Services spokesman. He said the winds are expected to die down by Wednesday.

In Los Angeles County, four fires ate through more than 80,000 acres, destroying at least 24 homes, a church and numerous outbuildings and injuring eight

people, including two firefighters. Most of those hurt had minor injuries, said Rick Dominguez, a Los Angeles county fire inspector.

For longtime residents of the rugged canyons north of Los Angeles, the massive Buckweed fire represents decades of concern. That fire triggered the evacuation of 15,000 residents, officials said.

"We always have fires in the canyons, and you pretty much know where they're going," said Kim Nelson, a resident of Saugus since 1974. "But this is a wildfire in the truest sense of the word. We haven't had any relief for two days. None."

As winds picked up Monday morning, flames forced brief evacuations in Saugus, a sprawling collection of new developments and old horse ranches in the canyons north of the San Fernando Valley.

Families ran from their homes clutching armloads of clothing and electronics after sheriff's deputies roared through the neighborhood on motorcycles announcing a mandatory evacuation. Neighbors hugged and cried as they parted.

Yet almost as quickly as the fire sped downhill toward two dozen homes, heat billowing ahead of it, the blaze dissipated after consuming the fuel in its path.

In the San Bernardino Mountains, flames roared toward homes north of Lake Arrowhead, with officials confirming that 138 structures were destroyed and 1,500 homes were in peril.

Earlier Monday, an online appeal from Lake Arrowhead firefighters summed up their desperate situation: "Immediate threat to 100 structures and possible threat to thousands ... Multiple downed power lines. IC (Incident Command) asking for resources from anywhere... . Lack of resources hindering suppression efforts. Unable to fly aircraft. All local engines are depleted."

Help is coming.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said the California National Guard will make 1,500 National Guardsmen available to support the firefighting efforts. The troops include 200 currently patrolling the Mexico border.

"It is a tragic time for California," the governor said Monday afternoon. "I saw the tremendous devastation caused by these fires firsthand today and I want to commend all of the brave firefighters that have been battling the blazes around our state. They have done an extraordinary job."

"We have the best-trained, the best-equipped and the most experienced firefighters in the world and I am committed to making all of the state's resources available to them to get these fires under control."

California has also asked nearby states to send in 50 strike teams, each with five engines, said Eric Lamoureux, a spokesman with the state Office of Emergency Services. The state is also expecting more planes from National Guard forces in three states to arrive over the next few days, Lamoureux said.

The fires searing Southern California are being fueled by a run of extreme weather that may not be over yet, said Bill Patzert, a climatologist with NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.

First, drenching rains in 2004-05 spurred shrub and grassland growth. Then a dry year was followed by a deep drought, with Los Angeles rainfall totaling just 3.21 inches in 2006-07, the lowest since record-keeping began in 1877.

"Since last spring, the moisture level has been rock-bottom. We actually got through the summer on a prayer," said Patzert.

"Now, as we go into the fall, which is normally Santa Ana season ... we have an extremely high, dry fuel load and an extra-large, long-lasting Santa Ana," Patzert said.

To make things worse, the consensus among long-range forecasters is that the south state is facing another dry winter, with limited prospects for rainfall that could put out new fires.

"The truly scary part here is what we're seeing could be a preview of coming attractions," Patzert said. "The only thing that would stop a repeat down here would be a wet winter."

Still, Patzert said, in the parade of weather extremes that shapes Southern California, none of this is terribly unusual.

The biggest new complication comes from people -- millions and millions of them.

In the area stretching from Santa Barbara to Los Angeles, Patzert said, the population has grown so rapidly that "we've become part of the fuel load," increasing risks to both firefighters and residents.

Population has nearly quadrupled since the 1950s in the seven counties running from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border, said state demographer Mary Heim.

In 1950, 5.6 million people lived in Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego counties. By 2006, according to the most state estimates, that had exploded to 21.7 million.

The relentless fires this week summon memories of California's "fire siege" of 2003. That series of fires erupted in late October from Los Angeles to San Diego,

scarring 750,000 acres, killing 22 people and destroying more than 3,600 homes.

In the current conflagrations, Northern California is doing its share. On Sunday, a Sacramento-based strike team of five engine companies and two battalion chiefs headed south. The team was fielded from the Sacramento Fire Department, the Sacramento Metro Fire District, Folsom Fire Department, and the Cosumnes Community Services District.

Elk Grove Fire sent 16 people, and the Roseville Fire Department deployed 12 people and two engines Sunday night.

"This is going to be a trying time for the residents of Southern California and firefighters from throughout the West who are battling some incredibly tough conditions," said Roseville Fire Chief Ken Wagner. "From what I know of the fire activity, we're probably going to hear about some pretty heroic stuff."

In another gesture of help from the north, 100 California Highway Patrol officers from the Sacramento area were dispatched Monday evening to help with the fire. They planned to leave from the patrol's academy in West Sacramento in a vast convoy of black-and-white patrol cars.

An equal number will head south from the Bay Area, and more from the Central Division based in Fresno.

This is to supplement Southern California CHP officers already working 12-hour shifts, said CHP spokesman Tom Marshall.

The help is clearly needed.

Public safety agencies in San Diego County were reeling with the demands from seven big fires. Every firefighter in the county is "boots on the ground" -- and it still isn't enough, said Holly Crawford, with the county's Office of Emergency Services. "I can tell you that -- walking around the Emergency Operating Center -- people are saying that this is the worst fire situation that they've seen in their lifetime. It's north, it's south, west, east and central. It's immense."

Within the overwhelming mass of the crisis, individuals try to cope.

A state-run evacuee shelter was established at the Del Mar Fairgrounds north of San Diego in Solana Beach. By Monday evening, the shelter was full.

Hundreds of people milled about as wind whipped the palm trees and an ominous pall blanketed the fairground. Many of the evacuees wore face masks.

Even inside the buildings, a smoky haze lingered.

Nora Hileman was waiting for the bus bringing her mother, Gloria, to arrive from

a nursing home in Rancho Bernardo. She'd been waiting three hours for her mother, who is recovering from recent knee surgery.

Hileman recalled her anguish as she awaited word of her mom's situation: "I was watching TV, and was like, 'Please, please, don't burn Rancho Bernardo.' It charred it."

Nearby, the Burtons were sitting on the floor, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, waiting for word of what had become of their house in Rancho Penasquitos. With just a half-hour's notice, Kate Burton crammed her four kids and two dogs in her car and headed for the shelter.

Burton said she didn't evacuate after the area's devastating Cedar fire in 2003, but her attitude changed after watching the effects of Hurricane Katrina on television: "I learned we can't be complacent."

EVACUATED More than 315,000 people  
HOMES/STRUCTURES DESTROYED At least 895  
HOMES THREATENED At least 15,100  
ACRES BURNED At least 267,236; 14 fires  
CASUALTIES One dead, 39 injured  
Source: Cal Fire, state Office of Emergency Services

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