

1. WILDFIRES: Blazes hit Southern Calif. with a vengeance (10/25/2007)

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After a three-week lull, the 2007 fire season roared back to life this week as Southern California seemingly exploded in flames from Santa Barbara to the Mexico border.

By Thursday morning, state fire agency CAL FIRE reported that a dozen major fires (larger than 500 acres) had consumed nearly 450,000 acres of public and private property, destroyed well over 1,600 homes or other structures and forced the evacuation of an estimated million persons. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) on Sunday declared a state of emergency covering seven counties. President Bush swiftly met his request for federal assistance and was on his way to see the area on Thursday morning.

The federal support helped marshal additional aerial support, and by midweek, there were more than two-dozen air tankers and 40 helicopters in service, and nearly 10,000 fire fighters actively engaged in containing fires in dozens of locations.

Air support came in from several other states. The 153 Airlift Wing, Cheyenne, Wyoming; the 145th Airlift Wing, Charlotte, North Carolina; and the 302 Airlift Wing, Colorado Springs, Colo., were providing two C-130 aircraft each plus support personnel to Southern California. The aircraft and personnel were based temporarily at Channel Islands Air National Guard Base.

While official estimates of the cost of fighting the disparate fires reached \$100 million, some officials believed total damages would exceed \$1 billion in San Diego County alone. There were at least six deaths and 45 injuries directly attributed to these fires.

Though news reports centered on the fires affecting Malibu and San Diego that resulted in severe destruction of luxury homes, there appeared to be four separate centers of major fire activity in Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino and San Diego counties.

Among the worst of the fires was the Witch fire in San Diego County, which was merged with the nearby Poomacha fire midweek. Mandatory evacuations remained in place for the community of Julian and there was still a threat to Pine Hills reported. At least 695 homes, 30 commercial properties, and 50 outbuildings were destroyed, while 250 homes, 10 commercial properties and 50 outbuildings were damaged. Still, fire officials said, 5,000 residences, 1,500 commercial properties, and 300 outbuildings are threatened. 12 firefighters have been injured on this fire.

Major active Southern California fires

Fire	County	Acres	Costs	Containment
Witch/Poomacha	San Diego	232,990	\$3 million	20 percent
Harris	San Diego	81,000	\$2.5 million	10 percent
Ranch	Los Angeles	55,756	\$4.5 million	70 percent
Buckweed	Los Angeles	38,356	\$2.5 million	100 percent
Santiago	Orange	23,000	\$1.5 million	30 percent
Horno/Ammo	San Diego	10,000	N/A	50 percent
Rice	San Diego	9,000	N/A	10 percent
Malibu/Canyon	Los Angeles	4,500	\$4.5 million	85 percent

Though they had many different points of origin, and largely affected non-public lands, the Southern California fires were all fanned by dry Santa Ana winds and were usually located in extremely rugged terrain. By midweek, fire officials declared the Santa Ana wind event over and several of the fires had been brought into containment. Nonetheless, a half-dozen others defied attempts at control.

On Tuesday, officials closed both the Angeles and Los Padres national forests, while allowing traffic to continue on highways through the forests. Ed Gilliland, spokesman for the Angeles National Forest, reported full containment of the Buckweed fire, which had burned 38,350 acres, and some progress in fighting the Ranch fire though it reached 55,000 acres. As teams got a handle on one area they were being deployed elsewhere, he said. "Firefighters go where the need is," he told *Land Letter*.

National fire officials optimistically hoped that the worst of the 2007 season had ended in late September, when early rains and snow quelled continuing blazes in Idaho and Montana – two states that had been especially hard hit this year. On Oct. 5, the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, issued what seemed to be its last daily report, stating minimal activity and no fires exceeding 500 acres. Even a late spate of five smaller fires in Kentucky last week was quelled by rainfall over the past weekend.

At the time the fire center reported that a total 8.25 million acres had burned so far this year, compared to 9.1 million acres as of Oct. 1, 2006. The 10-year average for wildfires is 5.7 million acres, indicating a significant increase in more recent years.

As of today, the official tally of land burned this year stood at 8.72 million acres.

After the Malibu Canyon fire erupted Oct. 20, CAL FIRE canceled its stand-down order and joined with the Office of Emergency Services and the California National Guard to establish 21 fire operation centers and deploy all available resources to the blazes.

Fires could spark changes to Forest Service budget

Southern California's latest spate of wildfires could be enough to convince lawmakers to develop a new system of funding for federal fire suppression programs, leaders of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee said yesterday.

Subcommittee Chairman Norm Dicks (D-Wash.) is developing legislation that would set a limit on the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management's fire costs and hand the rest over to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Unlike hurricanes, fire suppression is handled out of appropriated dollars, and in the past the agencies have shifted funds from other programs – including hazardous fuels reduction – to pay for firefighting.

"Taking the money away from the Forest Service and BLM out of their accounts totally disrupts the management of the agencies that are already underfunded," Dicks said. "It just doesn't make sense."

Last year, the federal government spent nearly \$2 billion fighting fires on about 10 million acres nationwide. As of last week, the federal government spent just over \$1.7 billion fighting wildfires, but that was before the Southern California events, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

For fiscal 2008, the House and Senate appropriations measures would provide \$859 million for the Forest Service and \$294 million for the Bureau of Land Management, a figure based, as always, on the 10-year average of fire suppression costs.

The Forest Service devotes more than 45 percent of its budget to fire suppression and preparedness, compared to 13 percent in 1991 and 25 percent in 2000.



The scorched landscape in Hasley Canyon illustrates the high intensity fires that burned through So. California this week. Photo by Alexis West. Courtesy of Inciweb.org.

"We need to budget for these types of situations so we're not shortchanging the service," said the ranking member of the Interior spending panel, Rep. Todd Tiahrt (R-Kan.)

In July, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) floated a plan to establish an \$800 million emergency trust fund for USFS and Interior to fight wildfires without diverting funds from other agency programs. The money would be used to cover 80 percent of firefighting costs above the annual appropriated amount.

Similar wildfires in San Diego County four years ago this month helped spur action on the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, which had stalled in the Senate. This week's firestorms may simply lead to more money.

"In terms of managing our forests, we usually find our way very quickly to develop those dollars following a tragedy," Appropriations Committee ranking member Jerry Lewis (R-Calif.) said on the House floor Tuesday. "The dollars that are much more difficult are those involved in managing our forests long-term."

Environmentalists criticized the administration for proposing to cut money for wildfire preparedness and community fire programs in favor of timber sales in its budget proposal earlier this year. Since fiscal 2001, federal funding for state and local community fire protection programs has declined from over \$148 million to \$85 million proposed in fiscal 2008.

Spending more money on community planning and local efforts will save in the long-term, said Franz Matzner, forests program manager for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"The most important strategy going forward is making sure the federal budget is focused on the preventative measures and community planning that will give us the best results," Matzner said. "There's no doubt the current structure of the spending is putting tremendous pressure on the Forest Service, and it's not sustainable. It doesn't make sense."

In hearings this year, federal land managers cited growth in the wildland urban interface (WUI), where 8.4 million homes have been built since 1990, as driving suppression costs. Forced to defend private property and buildings that were not there before, firefighting is now more difficult and expensive.