

Calif. firefighters wage fierce wildfire battles

By CHRISTINA HOAG, Associated Press Writer Christina Hoag, Associated Press Writer – AUGUST 29 2009

LOS ANGELES – Firefighters beat back flames licking at ocean-view estates Friday, while another wildfire raged through a dry forest above Los Angeles' foothill suburbs. Residents nervously watched aircraft drop loads of water and retardant on nearby blazing slopes.

The dramatic success of an overnight air and ground battle against a swift-moving blaze on the Palos Verdes Peninsula was tempered by the threat from an out-of-control fire on the opposite side of Los Angeles in the steep San Gabriel Mountains above the city of La Canada Flintridge.

The blaze in Angeles National Forest had grown to nearly 8 square miles by Friday evening and was creeping east toward Los Angeles foothills suburbs, Forest Service spokeswoman Rachel Mailo said. It was 5 percent contained. Hundreds remained evacuated Friday evening and hundreds more were packed and ready to move on a moment's notice.

"We're boxed up and ready to go," said La Canada Flintridge resident Steve Buntich, watching helicopters line up to siphon water from a golf course reservoir. He said his wife and children had evacuated to a friend's house for several hours, but had since returned home.

Ash fell from the sky and huge billows of smoke rose from the mountains as Elias Yidonoy, 62, and his wife prepared to leave their La Canada Flintridge home. Their minivan was loaded with suitcases filled with clothing, documents and photographs.

"It's wait and see," said Yidonoy, who with his wife had also left their home for several hours overnight and then returned.

The foothill residents were among more than a thousand Californians chased from their homes by the threat of wildfires.

The Palos Verdes Peninsula fire roared to life on the south Los Angeles County coast Thursday night and spread rapidly up canyons in the city of Rancho Palos Verdes. As many as 1,500 people fled as hundreds of firefighters rushed to protect homes in the fire's path in adjacent Rolling Hills Estates.

"The fire was stopped right at the backyards of those homes," county fire Chief Deputy John Tripp told a morning news conference.

Calm, windless conditions allowed water-dropping helicopters with spotlights to work much of the night. Six homes received minor exterior damage, and the only structures destroyed were an outbuilding and gazebo. No injuries were reported.

After daybreak, no flames were showing and all evacuations were lifted, but Tripp warned that fire could still surge out of the uncontained area.

"We are not out of the woods yet," he said.

Firefighters continued to work the ashen landscape, and a helicopter dropped loads of water sucked from the Pacific Ocean.

The fire above La Canada Flintridge was moving eastward and residents of adjacent Altadena were likely to see flames, said U.S. Forest Service spokesman Stanton Florea. A major goal was to keep the fire from spreading up Mount Wilson, where many of the region's broadcast and communications antennas and the historic Mount Wilson Observatory are located, Florea said.

"We've had some success but unfortunately not enough to say we have any containment," Florea said.

Elsewhere in the Angeles National Forest, more than 1,600 firefighters working in 102-degree heat had achieved 60 percent containment of a 3.1-square-mile blaze in a canyon above the city of Azusa. No structures were threatened or damaged.

"We're getting a handle on it. It's just taking a little longer than expected," said J.S. Forest Service spokeswoman Rachel Mailo.

To the north in the state's coastal midsection, a nearly 8-square-mile fire threatening Pinnacles National Monument kept 100 homes under evacuation orders near the Monterey County town of Soledad. The blaze, only 15 percent contained, was started by agricultural fireworks used to scare animals away from crops.

In the southern part of Monterey County, firefighters had 100 percent containment of a 5 1/4-square-mile fire that had threatened 20 ranch homes.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency Friday in Los Angeles and Monterey counties.

"It's fire season, clearly," he said. "There's tremendous amount of heat all over the state."

A nearly 3 1/2-square-mile fire in Yosemite National Park was 10 percent contained, said staff member Erik Skinrud.

The Mariposa County Sheriff's Office ordered guests and staff at the Yosemite View Lodge, just outside the park's western gate, to evacuate Friday afternoon due to the fire. People without lodging were offered beds in a shelter in Mariposa staffed by the Red Cross.

Residents of the nearby community of El Portal watched as water-dropping helicopters refilled from the Merced River.

Park spokeswoman Kari Cobb said officials closed a campground and a portion of Highway 120, anticipating that the fire would spread north toward Tioga Road, the highest elevation route through the Sierra. The number of firefighters was expected to double over the weekend to 1,000.

Southeast of Los Angeles in Riverside County, a 1 1/2-square-mile fire in the San Bernardino National Forest was 5 percent contained. Temperatures reached 106 degrees in the region.

In San Diego County, three fires totaling 1,000 acres burned on the Camp Pendleton Marine base but posed no threat to buildings, Cpl. Gabriela Gonzalez said.

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