



CALIFORNIA BATTLES DEVASTATING WILDFIRES

October 24, 2007

Fierce winds and no rain in California continue to fuel wildfires that have destroyed more than 1,400 homes or businesses, leading authorities to urge over half a million people to evacuate.

Fire personnel battling the fires, which began Oct. 20, are hampered by the strong dry Santa Ana winds, which are typical in the fall season.

The winds, caused by pressure differences on the eastern side of the San Gabriel Mountains, rush down the mountains, typically raising the air temperature on the coast by 10 degrees.

This week the winds have reached gusts of nearly 100 mph -- 60 mph more than normal-- and temperatures are 20 degrees above normal, the New York Times reported.

"We're in what we call the perfect storm of fire conditions," one firefighter told the NewsHour.

Local firefighters are counting on the winds to die down so they can send up more aircraft to drop water on the flames.

"If it's this big and blowing with as much wind as it's got, it'll go all the way to the ocean before it stops," San Diego Fire Capt. Kirk Humphries told CBS News. "We can save some stuff but we can't stop it."

Area of destruction

About a dozen fires are burning from north of Los Angeles to the Mexican border. Nearly 600 acres have been scorched, an area the size of New York City.

"We are entering day three of what appears to be one of the worse fires, probably the worst fire in San Diego County history, and easily one of the worst fires in the history of the state of California," said Ron Roberts, San Diego Board of Supervisors Chair.

The last major blaze in 2003 killed 16 people and destroyed about 2,000 homes. Authorities credit early actions and lessons from that fire for the lower death toll this time: five people as of October 24.

Evacuated

People in the fire zone are finding shelter with family and friends or public shelters such as Qualcomm Stadium, home of the San Diego Chargers football team.

Local businesses, non-profit organizations and private citizens have rushed to the shelters to help those whose homes were destroyed.

One family, Mike and Tere Miller of Rancho Bernardo, lost everything minus a few essential papers.

"If you even think that something's going to happen, you should prepare, and consider all the things that are most meaningful to you. Because once they're gone, you can never get them back," Tere Miller tearfully told NBC's "Today" show.

Aid and assistance

President Bush, who is scheduled to travel to the region Thursday, declared a state of emergency, authorizing the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to coordinate all disaster relief efforts.

Mindful of the embarrassment his administration suffered after Hurricane Katrina two years ago, the president quickly dispatched his Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff to assess the damage.

The president "wants to ensure that the state and local governments are getting what they need from the federal government," said White House press secretary Dana Perino.

However, California Sen. Barbara Boxer issued a statement complaining that because much of the National Guard have been deployed to Iraq, the response is weaker than it could be.

Additional fire crews from neighboring western states arrived Tuesday to help the worn-out local crews.

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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