

Firefighters gain on LA-area blaze as wind calms

by THOMAS WATKINS
AP Writer

LOS ANGELES—A respite in Santa Ana winds allowed firefighters to beat back flames that continued to whirl dangerously close to homes Wednesday morning, October 15, along the city's northwestern suburbs.

Fire crews worked through the night unleashing loads of water on hot spots of the more than 20-square-mile blaze charring slopes above the San Fernando Valley communities of Porter Ranch and Granada Hills. Flames also pushed west into Ventura County and threatened homes in Simi Valley.

The fire, one of three major blazes that have burned 34 square miles of Southern California, was 20 percent contained early October 15.

The wind forecast was a great improvement over the previous few days. Winds in the area were expected to peak at about 15 mph Wednesday morning then taper off for the rest of the day, though temperatures in the 90s were predicted and humidity remained very low, the National Weather Service said.

"We'll have to wait and see what Mother Nature brings us," Ventura County fire spokesman Tom Kruschke said earlier.

At their worst earlier in the week, the Santa Ana winds had hit 30 to 40 mph with gusts as high as 50 mph or more.

In a hectic start this week to the wildfire season, blazes destroyed dozens of homes, forced thousands of people to evacuate and caused two deaths. One man died in the flames, and a motorist was killed in a crash as a fire neared a freeway.

But for some residents in the northwestern suburbs, the flames seemed more of a curiosity than

a danger. One man spent Tuesday night, October 14, on the trunk of his car outside his home and watched firefighters battle a blaze that had already burned down nearby slopes.

In another neighborhood in Simi Valley, Gabriel Viola and Gheith Effarah stood outside Viola's house, chatting about the fire. They had gathered valuables and documents just in case, but neither seemed worried about the fire spreading.

"You don't want to be completely dumb," Effarah said. "I've been living here eight years and this is the third time we've gone through this. The firefighters seem to be on the ball. It calms you down."

Fifteen homes and 47 outbuildings were destroyed in the Porter Ranch area, and six more homes were damaged, said Los Angeles County fire Inspector Ron Haralson. Evacuation orders for several neighborhoods, including large parts of Porter Ranch, were lifted Tuesday night, but Haralson warned that the situation could quickly change along with the wind.

Ten miles away, there was major progress against Los Angeles' other big wildfire.

A 7 1/2-square-mile blaze in the northeastern San Fernando Valley was 80 percent contained and some evacuees were allowed to go home. But people who lived in an area where 38 mobile homes were destroyed were not permitted to return.

Teresa Escamilla, 47, lay on a cot in a Red Cross shelter, thinking the worst. She believed she lost everything including a shoebox containing five years of savings.

"It feels like it's not real," the nursing assistant said in Spanish. "It's a nightmare."



A hand crew cuts a fire break on a burned-out hillside in Los Angeles' Knollwood area as efforts to control wildfires in Southern California continue Tuesday, Oct. 14, 2008. AP Photo

Some residents managed to sneak into the Sky Terrace Lodge mobile home park, where numerous homes were reduced to lumps of melted plastic and buckled wood.

Darlene and Ken Rede's house survived, but one second door was gone. On their porch, a weather gauge was melted while a roll of paper towels hanging below it was untouched.

"Why did we get spared?" Darlene Rede asked. "I feel so bad for the people, my emotions are running crazy."

On the north coast of San Diego County, a 6-square-mile fire at the Marine Corps' Camp Pendleton was 60 percent contained. Most evacuation orders were lifted for residents of about 1,500 homes in neighboring Oceanside and many Marine Corps personnel and family members in military housing, but some remained in emergency shelters.

In eastern San Diego County along the US-Mexico border, a fire burned a third of a square mile and forced residents from 300 homes in the community of Campo before it was contained Tuesday night.

The outbreak of fires followed the weekend arrival of the first significant Santa Ana winds of the fall.

The Santa Ana winds usually sweep in between October and February as cold, dry air descending over the Great Basin flows toward Southern California and squeezes through mountain passes and canyons. The extremely low humidity levels, which make vegetation easier to burn, and high winds combine to whip fires into infernos.

(Associated Press writers Raquel Maria Dillon, Shaya Tayefe Mohajer, Solvej Schou, Robert Jablon in Los Angeles and Chelsea J. Carter in San Diego contributed to this report.)

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