

Firefighters Get Control as Questions Rise

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SAN DIEGO, Oct. 24 — Firefighters on Wednesday began to assert control over wildfires that have burned through nearly 500,000 acres and displaced half a million residents over four days in Southern California.

While many fires continued to burn, especially east of San Diego, and officials warned that weather changes could reinvigorate waning flames, lower temperatures and abating winds helped greatly reduce the threat.

Some fire officials were congratulating themselves on having avoided extensive loss of life, even setting dates for when the biggest fires might be brought under control.

But the second-guessing that comes with any natural disaster was already beginning. Questions were being raised about how the fight against the fires had been coordinated, how resources had been deployed and whether Southern California had become smarter after the 2003 fires that ripped the region and its psyche, or if it had just become lucky.

Some fire chiefs and elected officials said that they were angry with the state government for not adopting recommendations made by a blue-ribbon panel after the fires in 2003, in particular those that called for more firefighting equipment.

“There were a lot of calls for equipment and resources,” said Assemblyman Todd Spitzer, who represents a district in Orange County. “When you have a finite amount of resources, you have to prioritize life and property first, and so we didn’t get water dropping until we started to lose structures.”

The fires of October 2007 have sharpened questions about the costs of protecting the increasing numbers of people who live in remote and highly flammable areas, reawakened old jealousies that simmer across Southern California and forced new examination of the tension between the need for local emergency services and the willingness to pay for them.

San Diego County, the largest county in California without a fire department, relies on a hodgepodge of local departments that are almost all serving areas where populations are growing faster than their tax bases, and which are often low on money among a constituency that is generally allergic to taxes.

“Typically it takes the second or third time for a local fire department to make a compelling case” for increased tax revenues, said Stewart Gary, a principal at

City Gate Associates, a government consulting firm that studies San Diego fire departments.

One of the two firehouses in the East County Fire Protection District, which sits in the heart of the 2003 fire area, was nearly closed last month, saved only by a special tax approved by voters.

“San Diego County is very unique,” said Jack Grogger, the fire chief at East County. “A lot of times our communities end up having to tax themselves to pay for infrastructure.” Danny Mastro, the division chief of the Coronado Fire Services Department, also in San Diego County, said resources were never plentiful enough, but he said the region had learned from the hit it took four years ago.

“The communications between different agencies has significantly improved,” he said. “Emergency operations were set up a lot more quickly.”

A spokesman for San Diego County, Michael Workman, said he thought that the coordination across agency and jurisdictional lines in this crisis was great and that huge improvements in technology and operations had been introduced here since 2003.

Internet tools like WebEOC, a software system that allows information to be shared by multiple users at a time, and reverse-911, which automatically calls home phone numbers of a certain neighborhood or geographic grid to signal evacuation alerts, were introduced after the 2003 fires, Mr. Workman said.

As for the multiple levels in the fire-fighting system, he added, “Yeah, there’s some criticism, but we make it work.”

Some of the complaints reflect the structure of California’s emergency response system, which centralizes fire deployment decisions in a top-down state command. The system, which was developed after a devastating firestorm in Oakland in 1991, ranks fires and deploys resources based on their priority.

“It allows for adequate priority-setting in mitigating the emergency,” said Mark Ghilarducci, former deputy director of the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, who is now a consultant in Sacramento.

The centralized command can also lead to confusion, however. One of the hardest facts to nail down in the last few days has been the number of people forced to leave their homes. While many news media outlets reported nearly one million people evacuated, calls to each of the affected seven counties suggested the number was closer to 500,000.

According to figures provided by the county officials, by Wednesday 460,581 acres had burned; 1,248 structures, plus 170 mobile homes, had been destroyed; and 30 firefighters and 28 civilians had been injured.

Although San Diego County officials suggested that some elderly residents had perished in the evacuation, only one death was confirmed as having stemmed directly from the blazes.

Many of the fires on Wednesday slowed, but remained erratic. Camp Pendleton closed for part of the day after fires jumped Interstate 5, forcing it to close for a while as well.

After bureaucratic snags delayed deployment, 14 military fire-fighting helicopters and 5 C-130 military planes were released Wednesday to help fight the fires, said United States Representative Duncan Hunter, Republican of California.

In Orange County, one fire, known as the Santiago, was designated as arson, said Pat Markley, a county spokesman.

Officials in San Bernardino said the police at California State University, San Bernardino, had killed a man they chased out of some scrub near campus whom they suspected of trying to set a fire. According to the authorities, the police tried to detain the man, identified only as a 27-year-old from Arizona, but they shot him after he got into his car to flee and then tried to ram the officers' vehicle.

Of the five fires burning in San Diego County on Wednesday, officials were most concerned about the enormous Witch fire, which merged overnight with the smaller Poomacho fire to form a blaze that has burned almost 200,000 acres of northeastern San Diego County.

In the very southernmost part of the county, the Harris fire, the only one so far to claim a life, continued to threaten homes in the tiny communities of Jamul and Jamacha. By Wednesday, the blaze had grown to 73,000 acres and was largely uncontained.

In general, though, the high pressure system that was driving the Santa Ana winds began moving east Wednesday, greatly reducing the fire threat. Over the next few days the southern part of the state is expected to take in an onshore flow of winds, with resulting 20-to-25-degree temperature drops and a rise in humidity, improving toward the weekend.

That is a good thing, because a new batch of federal firefighters will not get here until then.

Federal officials said they were scrambling on Wednesday to dispatch 125 teams of federal firefighters, after state officials reversed course late Tuesday and said

they could use the help, officials at the Federal Emergency Management Agency said.

Glenn Cannon, the agency's assistant administrator overseeing disaster operations, said California officials had made clear as recently as 6 p.m. on Tuesday that they did not need backup personnel from the federal government, as they had firefighters from within the state and from other states.

The change in strategy meant that as many as 1,900 United States Forest Service firefighters would not all be in place until this weekend, Mr. Cannon said.

But Jay Alan, a spokesman for the governor's office, said, "There is no indication that we didn't want any help and then later did."

"When we determined we wanted and needed help, that is when the call went out," Mr. Alan said.

Also Wednesday, President Bush declared a major disaster in California, a higher designation than previously declared, paving the way for federal grants for temporary housing, home repairs and low-cost loans.