

'Worst in My Lifetime': Wind-Whipped Fires Char 500 Mobile Homes

by abc-News

When the Santa Ana winds howl in Southern California, they often have disaster written on them. Their near-hurricane force combined with single-digit relative humidity and heat wave temperatures are the worst-case scenario in what has become virtually a year-round fire season here.

A "red flag warning" issued earlier in the week meant little when the first fire near Santa Barbara broke out on Thursday followed by a second firestorm in the San Fernando Valley on Friday.

And by this afternoon the wind-driven fires roared through Orange County where there is zero containment this evening as dozens of homes continue to burn.

Fire fighting resources and water pressure are stretched to limit and in the communities of Corona, Yorba Linda, Anaheim Hills and Brea 10,000 people have been ordered evacuated.

Residents had little warning and less time to gather belongings and get out, sometimes in smoke so thick they were unable to drive their cars to escape. A 50-unit apartment complex has been destroyed but miraculously there have been no deaths reported and only a few minor injuries.

With all the bad news there may finally be a little good news. The high wind advisory for the region has been revised. Winds are not expected to be above 40 miles an hour overnight or on Sunday.

That's better for fighting the fires, but does not mean the danger has passed.

The earlier fires in the Montecito-Santa Barbara area and in the northern foothill community of Sylmar in Los Angeles were fueled by winds over 70 mph and spread quickly forcing many in the fires' path to flee their homes in the middle of the night in the dark.

"We are at the mercy of the winds," Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said at a news conference during which he declared a local emergency.

The most total devastation was at the Oakridge Mobile Home Park in Sylmar, where hundreds of mobile homes burned to the ground and what was left looked like a blackened moonscape.

Fifty-foot flames swept across the mobile home community like a sheet, and Los Angeles fire Capt. Steve Ruda had the heartbreaking task of telling Oakridge residents gathered in a high school auditorium that all was lost.

"We took residents out in fire trucks," he said. "It was amazing to see that the firefighters left at the very last minute that they had. ... Our hoses melted into the cement and concrete."

He showed off a tattered American flag that had been rescued.

Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton said he was concerned that some people may have died there. No deaths have been reported, but Bratton said police cannot go into the park with search dogs until the ground cools.

Many of the residents are elderly people who might have had a hard time getting out, Bratton said. He said he is also concerned because there are many burned cars at the park, even though people who evacuate usually take their vehicles.

The mobile home park has been declared a crime scene by police, leading to speculation that the fire there may have been arson.

There is still just 20 percent containment of the Sylmar fire, which burned more than 8,000 acres and caused officials to put an estimated 10,000 people in the fire's path under mandatory evacuation orders.

A portion of Interstate 5, the most heavily used highway connecting Southern and Northern California, is closed.

At one point this morning, there were serious concerns that power lines where the fire was raging might be damaged, which could have led to widespread power outages.

The Sylmar firestorm may prove to be the worst urban fire in Los Angeles in more than four decades. As of midday, it had destroyed at least 500 homes and spread over at least 6,500 acres.

"It's the worst in my lifetime -- the worst since the Bel Air fire in 1961," said Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky.

In that fire, nearly 500 homes were lost in one of the city's most wealthy residential communities.

"They're throwing everything at it that they can," Yaroslavsky said. "But when you're having 70-mile-an-hour

winds, you're talking about the safety of the firefighters themselves."

The "red flag warning" of highest fire danger has been extended to Sunday afternoon.

On Friday, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency for Santa Barbara County, Calif., as firefighters battled a fire there that damaged at least 100 homes and injured 13 people.

Ironically, when the Santa Ana winds blow, they clear the air of smog and the mountains around Los Angeles appear more vivid and majestic. But longtime residents know it is also when wind is king and danger is only a spark away.

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