

October 1, 1970

To: All Personnel

From: Mike Schori
Deputy State Forester

Once again, unfortunately, a disaster has brought you to Southern California. It seems that your trips south are becoming an annual affair.

It is impossible to mention all the examples of outstanding work performed, or to even recognize the many, many citizens, groups, organized firemen, military, or agencies by name. I do want each and every one of you to know that I am deeply appreciative of your performances and attitudes.

Within the Division I particularly noticed the flexibility that we have always purported to have. It was also very obvious that the desire and willingness to protect life and property were ever present. Camaraderie made a tough situation easier. Many people performed jobs completely unfamiliar to them.

This siege of historic fires has left a brand on Southern California that will not soon be forgotten.

We want you all to have a safe trip home, and next time we hope to visit with you under different circumstances.

We have attached a general summary of the fire situation that developed on Friday, Sept. 25, 1970. We have also attached a map of the locations of the fires and a road map to get you started back home.

Again, guys, thanks a "helluva lot", and we, in District VI, hope that our hospitality was acceptable considering the circumstances.

Michael O. Schori
MICHAEL O. SCHORI
Deputy State Forester

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M E M O R A N D U M

To: All Personnel

October 1, 1970

From: Fire Information Office

Subject: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRE ACTIVITY
0800 9-25-70 to 0800 10-1-70

Early Friday morning, 9-25-70, Santana winds began blowing strongly in the whole Southern California area. Shortly after 1000 hours, the first of what was to be a disastrous series of fires was reported below Tecate Peak.

The fire spread rapidly with the wind from an abandoned campfire and burned over the peak. A car parked at the lookout was destroyed and the lookout had to be extinguished to prevent its destruction. Meanwhile, another fire had started at El Casco in San Timoteo Canyon west of Beaumont in Riverside County and was moving fast to the west and north. It eventually caused the evacuation of residents in Live Oak Canyon. Firefighters managed to save all the homes there and caught the fire at the south edge of Redlands late that night after it had blackened 5,000 acres. The Tecate Fire continued burning out of control southwest of the peak and moved into Mexico.

At the height of the Tecate and Casco fires, dispatchers began to sense the situation was about to overtax firefighting forces in Southern California as two new fires broke out in Los Angeles County. Aircraft had been called off the Casco Fire due to extreme wind conditions and were sent to a fire starting south of the Ventura Freeway in Las Virgenes Canyon in the Malibu area. More aircraft were needed at another fire starting at the Newhall refinery. The District IV Airco was requested as the first step in a mass migration of CDF forces to the south.

By 1400 hours on 9-25-70, the situation was worsening rapidly. All of the first four fires were out of control and spreading extremely rapidly over freeways, through homes, moving downhill as fast as uphill. Riverside Ranger Unit reported 12 fires since 0800 and had 12 stations uncovered. The other Ranger Units and counties were rapidly being depleted as well. Additional firetrucks and hand crews were called for and being sent from as far north as the San Francisco Bay area.

While the four large fires raged on, numerous other starts were being contained rapidly by various city, county, State, and federal units. One such quick response by CDF units saved a new home in

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRE ACTIVITY

Page 2

Reche Canyon south of Loma Linda as two trucks contained a brush fire at 2 acres. Another fire had broken out in the City of Colton south of San Bernardino, and was contained at 50 acres before it could reach any homes. At the same time, three potentially bad fires had broken in Orange County and were contained rapidly from 30 to 500 acres.

By 1700 hours, the situation was even worse. The wind was not dying down and the Newhall Fire was reported to be 6,000 acres heading south and west through the Santa Susana Mountains. The Malibu Fire was reported to be 8500 acres and threatening homes in the Monte Nido area. In addition, another fire had broken out in Lopez Canyon above San Fernando with reported losses of house trailers.

By 2000 hours, the situation was hectic. San Diego units had responded to seven more fires, some grew to as much as 150 acres before being contained and some were reported to have been incendiary. The problems in Los Angeles were mounting. A new fire in Mint Canyon north of the Antelope Freeway had already consumed over 1,000 acres. The Newhall Fire had ripped through the Santa Susana-Chatsworth area leaving scores of expensive homes charred. The Malibu Fire was over 15,000 acres and was headed toward the Pacific Coast Highway.

By midnight of the 25th, line was almost completed on the Casco Fire and the Tecate Fire was looking better on the 2,000 acres north of the border. Meanwhile, CDF units stopped a 50-acre grass fire at Interstate 10 west of Beaumont and a 10-acre fire in the Chino Hills. The Newhall Fire was headed south toward the Malibu Fire and west toward Simi. The Malibu Fire had long since hit the Coast Highway and homes were burning on both sides of it. Another fire had broken in the northeast part of Ventura City and was threatening homes. The Lopez Fire was beginning to look better, but the Solemint Fire had burned 12,000 acres and was out of control in rough terrain with erratic winds. (Mint Canyon)

The whole fire situation was deteriorating steadily during the early morning of 9-26-70 as northern crews arrived to help. Five CDF fire trucks enroute to brush fires further south happened upon and attacked a fire in the City of Fillmore that threatened to wipe out the downtown area. These units succeeded in containing the fire to six commercial buildings within one city block and averted an even worse holocaust.

By 0630 hours on 9-26, the Newhall Fire had crossed the Ventura Freeway and joined the Malibu Fire at Agoura. Firemen on the Malibu Fire were busy protecting more homes in the canyons off the Coast Highway. The wind that had slackened little during the night, increased even more. Then came the report of a fire starting in the Laguna Mountains east of Pine Valley in San Diego County. By 0830 hours, the fire was 50 to 60 acres and beginning to burn timber

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRE ACTIVITY

Page 3

west of the origin. Two other fires had been contained in the Crafton Hills in San Bernardino County. Both were of suspicious origin. The whole west line of the Newhall Fire was open and beginning to give more trouble in Ventura County. The Lopez Fire was being contained, but the Solemint was alive and moving towards homes north of Saugus.

More crews arrived from Northern California and out of State, but the situation was about to get even worse. While all areas were having problems, the Laguna Fire had suddenly developed fire storms, had jumped Sheepshead Road and was headed towards the community of Pine Valley from the east.

Saturday proved to be as disastrous as the day before, as fire after fire started while the already big fires became monstrous. Ventura reported new fires at Fillmore, Camarillo, and another fire moving into the county parallel to the Newhall Fire from Val Verde, as the Newhall caused problems in the Simi and Thousand Oaks area.

Los Angeles County reported a new fire at Liebre Gulch, southeast of Gorman and in the Angeles National Forest high above Glendora along the east fork of the San Gabriel River the U. S. Forest Service was beginning work on a fire in very rough country.

Riverside County reported several more fires. One in Cherry Valley started at Bogart Park and wiped out 300 acres of brush and several homes rapidly. Evidence indicated this fire was caused intentionally and an arrest was made.

More fires occurred in San Bernardino County. Two in the Muscoy area burned together covering 1400 acres and destroyed 10 homes and a lumber company. Another small fire in the same general area proved to be incendiary.

Meanwhile, the few CDF and USFS pumper crews not assigned to other fires were having little success with the fast moving Laguna Fire. They had averted disaster in Pine Valley once with a well-timed backfire that temporarily turned the fire south. But the wind was picking up even more and a new fire storm developed, threatening Pine Valley again. The village was evacuated in a 40 to 50 mph wind storm as a butane tank exploded from the heat. By 1000 hours, the fire was moving south through open, rugged brushland toward Interstate 8.

By 1100 hours, the fire had jumped Interstate 8 on a six-mile front and was headed west at an extreme rate of spread. Eleven pumpers, 4 dozers, and 3 hand crews were attempting to protect as much property as they could. It was rapidly becoming apparent to dispatchers that eastern San Diego County was in bad trouble. Fire control manpower and equipment resources were already depleted badly and 300 men were ordered from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Every available CDF and

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRE ACTIVITY

Page 4

USFS pumper and hand crew from San Bernardino, Orange, and Riverside Counties and any that could be spared from other fires had been dispatched.

In Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, the Solemint Fire had been pushed by strong northeast winds to the edge of Saugus, where 8 homes were lost. Later on, it was discovered that a fatality had occurred there. The Newhall Fire and the Malibu Fire were joined at the Ventura Freeway and together had burned 60,000 acres of brush and an estimated 150 homes had been destroyed or damaged. Firemen were having new problems in Ventura on the western finger of the Newhall that was named the Simi Fire. By noon, 46 firetrucks were protecting homes and battling the blaze below Oak Ridge north of Santa Susana and along Highway 118 from Simi to Susana Knolls.

By 1500 hours, the Thousand Oaks portion of the Newhall Fire, which had burned to the Ventura Freeway through the southeast corner of Ventura County was slowing down with decreased winds. The Simi portion had reportedly destroyed about 20 homes in the Susana Knolls area and was moving west toward Moorpark when another fire started near Fillmore and began spreading southward toward Moorpark. Another fire was burning southwest of Moorpark in Camarillo Heights and had damaged at least 15 structures.

The situation was bad in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, but was rapidly getting even worse in San Diego County. By 1500 hours, the Laguna Fire was being fanned by 50 mph winds and the communities of Corte Madera, Morena Valley, and Boulder Oaks were being evacuated, as well as the Los Pinos Lookout northwest of Morena reservoir. By this time, the fire was moving steadily northwest on a seven-mile front with five percent humidity and temperatures about 90°. By 1700, the fire reached Morena Valley on the south end of the fire's head and Boulder Oaks on the north end. Agency fire dispatchers continued to order more men and equipment from every source they could find. 1,000 men were ordered from Arizona and New Mexico.

At 1900 hours, trouble again began boiling back toward the origin. The north flank was picking up and had jumped the Sunrise Highway. For the third time, Pine Valley was threatened. By 2000 hours, the uprising turned into a full-blown fire storm and again blew through Pine Valley and back into the burned area of several hours earlier. The west end of the fire at the same time was eating southward toward Hauser Canyon and west toward Barret Lake.

By 2100 hours, the Laguna Fire had consumed 27,000 acres of watershed, including 6,000 acres of brush. 400 men were on the lines with 100 USAF personnel and 20 mutual aid firetrucks from La Mesa, El Cajon, San Diego, and other city fire departments.

The wind continued through the early morning hours of 9-27-70, never lessening below 25 mph on most parts of the fire. At 0200

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRE ACTIVITY
Page 5

hours, the fire was about 35,000 acres and had burned water tanks at Barret Honor Camp. Lyons Peak Lookout was evacuated.

By 0600 hours, the "Devil Wind" was increasing again. 50 mph winds were reported with gusts to 70 mph and the fire was again "really ripping." Reports of homes lost in Pine Valley were confirmed and new reports made on losses in Lawson Valley and Japatul. By now, the fire had burned out of the National Forest and was headed directly toward the heavily populated areas east and south of El Cajon. Now there were over 100 firetrucks, 20 Conservation Camp crews and 55 bulldozers working to protect homes and establish lines.

By 0730 hours, the fire had covered 55,000 acres and was headed hell-bent for Jamul and Procter Valley. Between 0730 and 0845, the southwest part of the fire began hitting more heavily populated areas south of El Cajon. 18 homes were lost quickly in Jamul as the fire jumped Highway 94. People were reported to be trapped and ambulances were dispatched. One farm worker suffered second and third degree burns. Firetrucks were kept constantly running from one area to another to protect lives and property. At 0830, the repeater burned out at Lyons Peak and fire fighters were further hampered by decreased communications. Five more homes were lost on Kimball grade southwest of Jamul by the finger that had jumped Highway 94.

At 0920, a new fire was taking off north of the main fire in Suncrest on the west side of Harbison Canyon. One home was already lost and 8 more threatened by the new fire. The Suncrest Fire was caught quickly, however, and was "lying down" by 1000 hours.

One hour later, the west line was moving out again. The flames could be seen to the east from the San Diego Headquarters at Monte Vista. Communications were still out and Morena Camp was being hit by the south line. The fire had mushroomed to 120,000 acres.

On the day of 9-27, the situation in Los Angeles County began to look better as far as fire spread. The wind was beginning to slow down but the main damage had already been done. A total of 161 homes had been burned with another 126 structures damaged on the Malibu and Newhall Fires. Five people lost their lives in the Newhall inferno and miraculously no lives were reported lost on the Malibu Fire. Fire fighters sustained 200 injuries, mostly from burns and smoke on the two fires. 168 buildings were destroyed or damaged inside Los Angeles City alone.

Problems were encountered in canyons on both the east and west lines during the day. Firemen were kept busy protecting homes from flare-ups in Topanga Canyon, Las Tunas, and Los Flores Canyon on the east side and Latigo Canyon on the west line.

During that afternoon, a Washington Ridge CYA crew had just arrived in the Saddle Peak area above the Los Flores Canyon when the fire

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRE ACTIVITY

Page 6

blew out of the canyon and engulfed their bus. Luckily the crew escaped with minor burns and smoke inhalation, but the bus was badly damaged.

Los Angeles County firemen attempting to protect homes on a new fire in the Hacienda Heights area were not so lucky. Five of them were burned, 2 critically, and 2 engines were lost in the blow-up. The fire was contained at 30 acres.

Another fire in the Hacienda area burned 200 acres and a third in the Fullerton area burned 3,350 acres and was not contained until noon the next day. A fourth fire started late in the day in the City of Pomona with more disastrous results: 13 homes lost, 40 acres burned.

Although the winds were dying down late on 9-27-70 at the lower levels, U. S. Forest Service fire fighters were still hampered by erratic winds on the Fork Fire 4,000 feet above Azusa.

Back in San Diego County, the fireworks continued in the area south of El Cajon and more were brewing in the Harbison Canyon area east of El Cajon. The western front had wiped out 11 homes in the Mexican Canyon area east of Jamacha Road and then destroyed the bridge across the Sweetwater River, isolating that area. Parts of heavily populated Spring Valley were being evacuated as the fire jumped the Sweetwater River and roared through homes toward Jamacha Road. It looked for a while like it might go all the way to Mt. Helix, but pumper crews managed to hold the fire at Jamacha Road near the Monte Vista Headquarters.

A little after 1300 hours, many structures had been lost in the Monte Vista area south of El Cajon and 140,000 acres had been consumed.

By 1500 hours, the northwest line was moving into the Harbison Canyon-Suncrest area where homes had been spared just a few hours before by the small Suncrest Fire. This time, they were not so fortunate as the Laguna monster fire tore through the canyon towards Interstate 8 to the north. The structure loss was mounting and even more were being lost further east as the north line ate into the town of Alpine.

Up until last that night, fire fighting efforts were restricted to the protection of homes and property. Yet, fire fighters managed to keep the fire south of Interstate 8 with the dubious aid of a strong northeast wind. On the southwest, a long finger of the fire extended to Sweetwater reservoir, just east of National City. By 1900 hours, the fire was 33 miles long and 11 miles wide and covered some 150,000 acres.

The wind began to subside, but it proved to be only temporary. At 2100 hours, the fire was boiling up again on the north line near

Japatul Road. By 0100 hours on the 28th, the wind had picked up to 45 to 50 mph and by 0200 more homes had been lost at Alpine. At 0845, 9-28-70, the fire finally succeeding in jumping Interstate 8 to the north, headed toward Descanso. Fire fighters jumped on the break and through hard work and determination, managed to stop its spread south of the town.

Late in the day, 9-28-70, the situation began to look progressively better. Men and equipment began to make good progress in constructing lines and the outlook was optimistic, but cautious. By 1930 hours, the fire was "very shakey," 30% contained. Some problems were being encountered on the lines near Descanso and Alpine, but were being handled.

By 2200 hours, the winds were dying and progress was speeding up in line construction. Problems were not over in other areas, though, as other crews tired from working fires in the counties to the north, they were called upon again. During the heat of the Laguna situation, several fires began popping up mysteriously in the North San Diego-South Riverside County area. Most were caught quickly by the few pumpers left in that area, mainly Schedule "A" pumpers from Riverside County. Two of the fires in the area of Pala and Lilac received too much of a headstart, however, and equipment had to be pulled in from wherever it could be found. The Pala "Sycamore" Fire burned quickly up a steep slope east of Pala-Temecula Road, and blackened 140 acres before it could be contained. Evidence again pointed to an incendiary origin. The Lilac Fire burned rapidly west toward U. S. 395. The few crews available for initial attack ran from place to place protecting homes and managed to save all but one trailer house and a vehicle. The origin of this fire had been obliterated by traffic and no evidence of cause could be found.

Fire that almost escaped notice in the melee were the Meadowlark Fire near San Marcos (1,143 acres) that was controlled entirely by fire districts and a 20-acre blaze that started east of the town of Julian. Knowing that fire crews had their hands full, the valiant citizens of Julian armed themselves with tools of all sorts and controlled the fire that was threatening their town.

As fires quieted on 9-29-70 and crews began to relax a little bit, they had time to reflect on what had happened during the last few hectic days. For those who are critical of their mistakes during this hectic period of almost constant emergency, the editor of this inadequate oracle reminds you of "The Objective":

The objective of all dedicated CDF employees should be to thoroughly analyze all situations, anticipate all problems prior to their occurrence, have answers for these problems, and move swiftly to solve them when called upon; however, when you are up to your a in alligators, it is difficult to remind yourself that your initial objective was to drain the swamp!

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FIRE ACTIVITY

Page 8

Just to prove that we can't relax too much, yet another fire started late on the 28th in the Cleveland National Forest north of Cuyamaca Peak. Weary crews from the Laguna Fire were immediately diverted to this fire. By 0300 on 9-30-70, this fire had 12,000 acres burning in heavy timber in rough terrain and 80% of the line was still open. By 2300 hours that night it was 70% contained. Some problems were still being encountered at the time of this writing.

Another fire, apparently set, started about 1345 hours at the mouth of Lytle Creek Canyon, northwest of San Bernardino in the San Bernardino National Forest. Once again, the same story. The fire burned promptly toward homes and leveled 6 before it could be diverted. Problems are still being encountered at 0630, 10-1-70, as the fire escaped containment on the northwest line and is moving southwest down from the top of San Sevine Peak in front of a northeast wind, adding another 500 acres to the 8,600 already burned.

The losses of this disastrous series of fires is staggering. Suppression costs along total roughly about \$9 million. The CDF has spent about \$3 million thus far. The present State-wide rate for fire suppression for all agencies' expenditures is \$2½ million per day!

Air tankers from Burbank, Boleta, Porterville, Ramona, and Ryan Air Attack bases have dropped 1,036,500 gallons of retardant in 752 hours of flight time at a cost of \$187,000. On the Boulder Fire alone, tankers and retardant have cost \$10,000 per hour and the mix crews are pumping an average of 32,500 gallons of retardant per hour. Total cost of air tankers to date is \$437,000, including the cost of retardant.

The air operation for the Southern California fires is the largest ever assembled anywhere! The aircraft based at Ryan Field have made the initial attack on 20 fires. 14 of the 20 were stopped by the aircraft and 4 of the remaining 5 were effectively slowed down.

Plans are already being made to counteract the effects of the Southern California fires before the coming winter rains. A plan of cooperative emergency action has been made by federal, State, and county agencies to provide the protection needed to prevent floods and soil erosion in the burned watersheds. Reseeding will be part of the answer, but not all of it. The construction of control dams and basins is being studied as a possible part of the solution.

FIRE INFORMATION OFFICE
District VI Headquarters

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