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Nation

Lessons From the Flames

In California, devastation is repeated, but not past mistakes

By Bret Schulte

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When the blasting Santa Ana winds propelled as many as 16 major wildfires across California last week, they summoned a veritable hurricane of embers and ash that swept from the Mexican border to north of Los Angeles. By week's end, the fires had blackened 500,000 acres, killed seven people, and destroyed at least 1,800 homes, many of them the multimillion-dollar mansions that embody California's promise of the American dream.



Residents along the Pacific Coast Highway cover their faces to protect against dense smoke.
(David Butow/Redux for USN&WR)

But for most Southern Californians, the fiercest fire since 2003 also proved to be a showcase for goodwill and lessons learned. Four years ago, a record-setting blaze that charred 750,000 acres and killed 22 people sparked recriminations among politicians, fire officials, and victims over a response that was widely characterized as slow and disjointed. In contrast, the current disaster has generated mostly praise for and among officials. President Bush, hoping to exorcise the demons of the slow response to Hurricane Katrina, unleashed federal resources and toured the scene himself. And Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff acknowledged "there's no question that [there were] a couple of the lessons from Katrina which we have put into effect here." By the following day, approximately 500,000 people had been smoothly evacuated, and many had returned home.

Still, for wide swaths of the seven affected counties, the scene was one of anguish and barely controlled chaos. Whatever the reforms since the last conflagration, experts say that San Diego, with its unique geography and worrisome sprawl, remains ground zero in a nation suffering from increasingly ferocious wildfires.

Despite a temperate climate, San Diego is an incendiary place to call home. The tinderbox is fed by dry Santa Ana winds, the result of intense air pressure in the mountains that eventually pours through Southern California. And the conditions are exacerbated by rapid development.

Firefighters have struggled to keep up with an area that can go from paradise to inferno in an instant. Deadly regional fires in the 1970s forced the government to create a tactical system that became the federal Incident Command System, which works to coordinate efforts nationally among agencies. But some instances work better than others. In 2003, firefighting in San Diego County remained an embarrassment. Fire chiefs lacked adequate equipment and personnel, and a hodgepodge of agencies scrambled to cover unincorporated areas. During that year's so-called Cedar Fire, even AA batteries for walkie-talkies ran out. In the aftermath, state officials promised to clean up their act.

Night and day. San Diego City Council President Scott Peters says the difference between 2003 and last week's fires is "night and day." He cites new building codes that outlaw some flammable materials, changes in brush management, and new pump trucks, ladders, and a plan to lease 50 new fire engines. The city has also drafted scores of volunteers for citizen emergency response. Perhaps most critically, the region implemented reverse 911 and 211 call systems. The former automatically dialed tens of thousands of homes, issuing warnings and evacuation orders as fires spread. The other became a hotline for harried residents to call with questions about road closures, shelters, and evacuation routes.

Where 2003 was marked by disorder, 2007 was characterized by the good-natured and swift response of volunteers. Elderly evacuees at San Diego's Qualcomm Stadium rested in air-conditioned quarters, and kids were kept occupied with arts and crafts. Volunteers and donations flooded shelters. At a shelter at Escondido High School, 81-year-old ViviAnn O'Connell and her poodle

found such creature comforts as showers and checkups for pets. "I'm safe, my little dog is safe, and everyone is considerate and helpful," she said.

After evacuating her parents and grandmother from their homes in Rancho Sante Fe, Lauren Bullock, 28, drove through showers of ash to coordinate volunteers at a 211 center in San Diego. "As many people as were evacuating, there were people volunteering," she says.

A reverse 911 call is what roused Shawn Freeman and her family from their San Diego home. With winds whipping fires within 30 miles of her house, Freeman started packing belongings at 1 a.m. Wednesday. "My husband was making fun of me," she recalls. "He said, 'Do what you want. I'm going to sleep.'" Then, four hours later, the call set the entire family on the road. Their home was spared.

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