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Lessons From the Flames

In California, devastation is repeated, but not past mistakes

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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.

System flaws. While largely successful, the reverse 911 system didn't work for everyone. Some residents

never received the calls. Rozee Blanco-Hickey, who lives on the La Jolla Indian Reservation, knew to get out only when a frantically honking car drove by at 3 a.m. She found the nearest shelter full so instead joined a group of evacuees in a supermarket parking lot. Two stores gave them food and water, and locals offered toys and baby supplies.

Indeed, volunteer efforts may have made all the difference in this disaster. In May, the California state auditor criticized the state's emergency preparedness efforts. According to the audit, "Despite the heightened awareness of the potential for a catastrophic emergency... the State is not as well prepared for emergencies as it should be." Also in May, state forestry officials predicted an extreme fire season and cautioned that equipment shortages within the California National Guard could impede firefighting efforts.

At the beginning of last week, some of those forecasts seemed to be coming true. Local officials pleaded for airdrops of water or retardant soon after the outbreak, though buffeting winds would very likely have rendered them useless and endangered pilots. And the state's lieutenant governor, Democrat John Garamendi, incensed some conservatives by asking that National Guard units in Iraq be brought home.

The fact is, the combination of a prolonged drought, high winds, and easily ignitable homes in brush lands meant there was little firefighters could do to extinguish the flames. "I've been in this business for 47 years, and I've got to tell you this is the worst I've seen in my lifetime," says Ron Coleman, a liaison for the California State Fire Marshal. "There are not enough firetrucks in the universe to stop it." Several fire officials also noted that so many blazes at once could hardly be a coincidence; the FBI is investigating arson.

Fire state. But these epic blazes are becoming the norm nationally. Since 2000, the country has seen six of its worst wild-land years on record. Acreage burned over the past four years is 211 percent higher than the 48-year average. William Sommers, director of George Mason University's EastFire Laboratory, faults the growing "wildland-urban interface" as one of two major drivers of growing wildfires. San Diego is a worst-case example: flammable homes encroaching on chaparral, the term given to this region's frequently dry shrubs, brush, and trees. The second is climate change, which is propelling droughts in some areas and raising temperatures.

In San Diego, officials have been faulted for not ordering more controlled burns to clear growth, but with houses set so far into the brush, such burns are dangerous. Concern for critical habitat also prevents land from being razed. Peters acknowledges that the authorities must do more to enforce a recently mandated

100-foot clearance zone around certain homes, which meets with resistance from residents who love their landscaping. And starting in 2008, new homes must be built with flame-retardant materials. But no one, not even the sunny Californians, believes these measures will prevent another catastrophic fire. "This will occur again," Coleman says. "We are a fire state."

With Chris Wilson, Kent Garber, Randy Dotinga in Escondido, Calif and Kenneth T. Walsh in Irvine, Calif.

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