

Wind-driven fire destroys 35 structures in Malibu

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The 4,500-acre blaze, driven by 50-mph winds, engulfs homes in Corral and Latigo canyons and forces the evacuation of thousands. A small fire in Ramona in San Diego County is quickly controlled.

As many as 35 structures have been destroyed and hundreds more are threatened in Malibu as a wind-driven fire raced through at least 4,500 acres today in Corral and Latigo canyons, forcing the evacuation of 10,000 to 14,000 people.

By mid-afternoon the blaze was 25% contained. Firefighters were making a stand near Kanan Dume Road to stop the fire's northwestward march through steep, heavy brush.

"The effort will be to try to pick it up, catch it and nail it before it continues to move westward," said Los Angeles County Fire Chief P. Michael Freeman.

Calling the fire "dynamic and dangerous," Freeman said firefighters were making a concerted effort on multiple fronts to protect structures.

The fire, driven in the early morning hours by fierce 50-mph winds, engulfed about five homes in Latigo Canyon, 15 in the Newell Road area and as many as 15 in the Sea Breeze area, Freeman said, cautioning that the numbers were preliminary. At least one commercial building near Via Escondido may also have burned.

Six firefighters received minor injuries, Freeman said.

At noon, firefighters were fanning out to protect structures in Paradise Cove and Ramirez Canyon. St. Aidan's Episcopal Church was also threatened.

Farther south, in Ramona in San Diego County, a 30-acre fire broke out but was 50% contained by 1 p.m. and not threatening homes or structures.

"It's now just a matter of getting it fully contained," said a spokeswoman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

In Malibu, the wide mandatory evacuation zone included all neighborhoods west of Corral Canyon Road, south of

Mulholland Drive, east of Trancas Canyon and north of Pacific Coast Highway.

Evacuation centers have been opened at Agoura High School in Agoura Hills and Channel Islands High School in Oxnard. About 1,750 firefighters, at least 45 fire engines, numerous hand crews, 23 water-dropping helicopters and two fixed-wings planes were attacking the blaze, which broke out at 3:30 a.m. on a dirt road at the top of Corral Canyon Road and Castro Crest Motorway, south of Malibou Lake. The blaze had been named the Corral fire.

Freeman said the cause had not been determined. He said arson investigators had been dispatched to the fire's origin and were investigating all leads, including a report that campers in the area might have started the blaze. He said there was no indication that the fire was caused by downed power lines, although lines and toppled poles had blocked roads.

Going into the afternoon, officials were hopeful that the winds would continue to subside.

"There are some silver linings as we stand here today," Malibu Mayor Jeff Jennings said. "The winds are giving firefighters a chance to hammer the fire and bring it under control."

"Waking up at 4 a.m., with the smell of smoke in the nose and the wind beating at the window, is something you learn to live with here," Jennings said. "But it always comes as something of a shock."

Corral Canyon residents were awakened about 3:30 a.m. by the smell of smoke, sirens and evacuation orders. At the time, "the winds are all over the place and the fire is moving in every direction," said Los Angeles County Fire Inspector Sam Padilla. Resident Carol Sue Stoddard said firefighters "came by and banged on the door and said, 'You have to get out and get out now.'" The 48-year-old filmmaker, who lives on Corral Canyon Road, said she saw the fire come down the hills and ignite pine trees next to her house. "I was running in circles. I could have grabbed more, but I was taking footage. . . . Embers were going everywhere."

Stoddard watched her collection of 12 classic cars catch fire as she fled. Although the cars are not insured, her \$2-million home is, she said.

Beverly Taki, 53, a Realtor who lives in Corral Canyon, said that the lights in her house went out about 5 a.m. and that she improvised by using the light of her cellphone. Taki said that

a legendary resident of Corral Canyon named Ben Kennedy, who has lived there since 1954 and is now in his 90s, had to be evacuated by firefighters after his caretaker's truck was destroyed.

"We are always nervous about fires," she said. "We're a mile and a half up the canyon."

Sonia Enriquez, a 29-year-old model, said that she smelled smoke about 3:30 a.m. in her home in the 26000 block of Latigo Shore Drive but that she "thought it just must be the old ashes and I went back to sleep. . . . I woke up an hour and a half later and there was fire all over the place."

By 5 a.m., she had fled. "It never got this close before," said Enriquez, who returned home by 6:30 a.m. after the danger had passed. "We knew the Santa Anas were coming, but you just don't think it's going to happen again so soon."

Sandie Haverick, 58, was packing up to evacuate her Paradise Cove mobile home this morning when she heard music coming from inside.

Her husband Dick, 64, was sitting at the baby grand piano playing a song he had written for her a couple of years ago called "Only for Today."

"I just had to play it for her one last time, just in case," Dick Haverick said.

Sandie stopped her packing and went to the piano. "I just stood there and cried," she said.

Malibu was hit in October by a brush fire that destroyed or damaged more than a dozen structures.

Dry conditions and a return of Santa Ana winds prompted red flag warnings Friday by the National Weather Service for Los Angeles and six other counties, an indication of added fire risks.

The warnings, which took effect at noon in mountain areas of L.A., Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Ventura and Kern counties, are expected to last until at least 6 p.m. Sunday. Winds of up to 75 mph are expected.

Warnings also were issued for coastal areas -- where gusts of up to 60 mph are expected -- until noon Sunday.

Red flag parking restrictions will be in effect until at least 10 p.m. today for the Hollywood Hills and other fire-prone areas of the city, Los Angeles fire officials said.

Ryan Kittell, a National Weather Service meteorologist, said a cold storm system moving across Arizona from Utah was keeping temperatures unusually mild for Santa Anas -- in the low 70s during the day -- bringing stronger-than-expected winds and blowing out lingering fog as the humidity dips to the single digits.

Fire agencies scrambled to bring added resources to Southern California amid decreasing humidity and increasing winds.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection had a dozen helicopters on standby, including five supplied by the California Army National Guard; 270 fire engines; more than 1,000 personnel; and two incident command teams across the region, said spokesman Daniel Berlant.

Federal resources included 11 air tankers, 18 helicopters, four military C-130s, 170 fire engines, 21 hand crews and four incident management teams, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Berlant said the added personnel and equipment would stay in the area through the weekend.

Winds are expected to die down Sunday but pick up again as a new storm moves into the area Tuesday.

To check parking restrictions, visit www.lafd.org/redflag.

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