

# Fire destroys 49 homes in Malibu

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The blaze, the city's most destructive in 15 years, burns nearly 5,000 acres. Thousands are evacuated and six firefighters are injured.

The most destructive fire in Malibu in nearly 15 years raced through parched canyons Saturday, consuming 49 homes and forcing the evacuation of thousands of residents.

The so-called Corral fire burned 4,700 acres before the fierce Santa Ana winds died down, allowing firefighters to make a stand. By evening, the blaze, which investigators said was started by "human activity," was 25% contained. Six firefighters sustained minor injuries, authorities said.

Meteorologists said the winds were subsiding and not expected to return today. A red flag warning, issued when the humidity level drops below 8%, would remain in effect in Los Angeles and Ventura counties until this evening.

Last month's wildfires ignited in multiple areas throughout Southern California and stretched limited firefighting resources thin. This time, only Malibu was ablaze. As a result, two dozen firefighting aircraft and hundreds of ground crews were able to concentrate their attacks.

"It helped that nothing else is going on," said U.S. Forest Service spokesman Jim Wilkins. "We have a lot of assets put in place."

Knowing that Santa Ana winds and low humidity were in the forecast, fire officials started preparing days ago.

More than 600 firefighters from around California and the Western United States had gathered at the National Orange Show grounds in San Bernardino before Thanksgiving, officials said.

About 1,750 firefighters, at least 45 fire engines, numerous hand crews, 23 water-dropping helicopters and two fixed-wing planes battled the blaze.

"This was remarkable. In my 35 years of doing this, it was an unprecedented mobilization," Wilkins said. "We've been doing this type of thing for many years. I just don't remember it on this type of scale."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, in a statement released Saturday afternoon, said he was reactivating the state of emergency he declared last month in response to the wildfires in Los Angeles, Ventura and San Diego counties.

Saturday's fire, the third significant blaze in Malibu this year, started about 3:30 a.m. south of Malibu Lake and was driven by 60-mph winds.

The cause was still under investigation, but arson investigators were looking into a report that campers in the area might have started the blaze.

There was no indication that the fire was caused by downed power lines, although lines and toppled poles had blocked roads, fire officials said.

One of the homes lost in the fire belonged to Flea, longtime bassist for the rock group Red Hot Chili Peppers. In a text message to a Times reporter, Flea wrote that the home had "burnt to a crisp."

In addition to the 49 homes destroyed, two outbuildings were demolished and 27 residences were damaged, fire officials said. Most of the devastation occurred in the fire's early hours in Latigo Canyon and the neighborhoods along Newell Road and Sea Breeze Drive.

Los Angeles County Fire Department Capt. Bob Goldman and his crew, Engine 70 out of Carbon Canyon, reached the Malibu Bowl area about 5 a.m. No houses had yet burned, but the hills were ablaze.

The firefighters took a stand in front of three houses at the end of Lookout Road as the last of the families who lived there fled. As required, the owners had cleared brush from within 100 feet of the structures.

"We thought that would protect us," Goldman said.

It didn't.

Driven by the strong winds, the fire bore down on them. It leaped the cleared area and went straight for the firefighters. The flames, Goldman said, were 75 to 100 feet high -- except they were being blown horizontally.

"Basically, we were caught in a firestorm," Goldman said. "It was remarkable. At one point I was very concerned about our safety."

Overwhelmed, the crew members abandoned their post and retreated down the road. The three houses, preheated by the approaching flames, ignited instantly and were ablaze within two minutes.

Goldman and his crew were able to save four homes nearby.

He estimated that the Malibu Bowl area had lost about 15 houses. About 100 homes had been at risk.

“The embers got everything,” he said. “They were getting rocketed in by the wind, driven into the eaves, the siding, the windows. Everything that could combust, did.”

L.A. County Fire Capt. Tony Fina, with Engine 89 in Agoura Hills, was also among the first firefighters at Malibu Bowl. He called the scene “a constant wall of burning embers.”

“The first house we went to had good clearance, but the wind took everything that was burning and threw it across the ground,” Fina said.

He and his crew spent 20 to 30 minutes beating back the flames. They won -- this time.

“Mother Nature didn’t want it as bad as we did,” Fina said.

Fina reached Corral Canyon just before sunrise, when the winds were kicking up to 50 and 60 mph.

“If you had the resources and could put a fire engine at every house, you’re still going to lose homes in a 60-mph wind,” he said.

The fire forced evacuations in neighborhoods west of Corral Canyon Road, south of Mulholland Highway, east of Trancas Canyon and north of Pacific Coast Highway. Evacuation centers were opened at Agoura High School in Agoura Hills and Channel Islands High School in Oxnard.

The routine of packing cherished belongings and family pets and fleeing for safety was familiar for many residents. “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,” said Malibu Mayor Jeff Jennings. “But it always comes as something of a shock.”

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 ignite pine trees next to her house.

“I was running in circles. I could have grabbed more, but I was taking [film] footage . . . Embers were going everywhere.”

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

Sonia Enriquez, a 29-year-old model, said 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 Saturday 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, “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.”

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