2003 Fire Siege
Causes, Response and Recovery

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California's integrated fire service system, which includes local, state and federal firefighting agencies and is one of the best in the nation, was literally tested under fire during the October 2003 wildfires. Due to prolonged drought periods, warm temperatures, low humidity, and 500,000 acres of dead standing trees due to the bark beetle infestation, Southern California was a kindling box waiting for a fire to occur.

As reported by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), below is the chain of events that lead to the worse fire and largest mobilization of firefighting resources in California's history (see Appendix D for the detailed chronology of the fires).

Tuesday, October 21, 2003

Weather condition—warm temperatures, low humidity, gusty northeast winds.

Robler 2 Fire started near Camp Pendleton in San Diego County at 12:00 noon. Federal firefighting agencies were immediately contacted, as well as state and local government resources.

Because of the wind conditions, CDF forces initiated staffing patterns with additional engine crews, dozers and staff lookouts. A little after 2:00 p.m. the **Grand Prix Fire** started near Rancho Cucamonga. Two hours later, the **Pass Fire** started near Reche Canyon in Riverside County. With three fires in three counties--San Diego, Riverside and San Bernardino--CDF initiated staffing patterns to bring on more resources. The federal counterparts were doing the same. These fires were burning hot, very erratic and fast due to the dry climate, low humidity and dead fuels.

Wednesday, October 22, 2003

Los Angeles, Orange and Ventura counties were starting their staffing patterns to bring on additional forces and state them in the wind prone areas. Gusty winds continued throughout the day.

Thursday, October 23, 2003

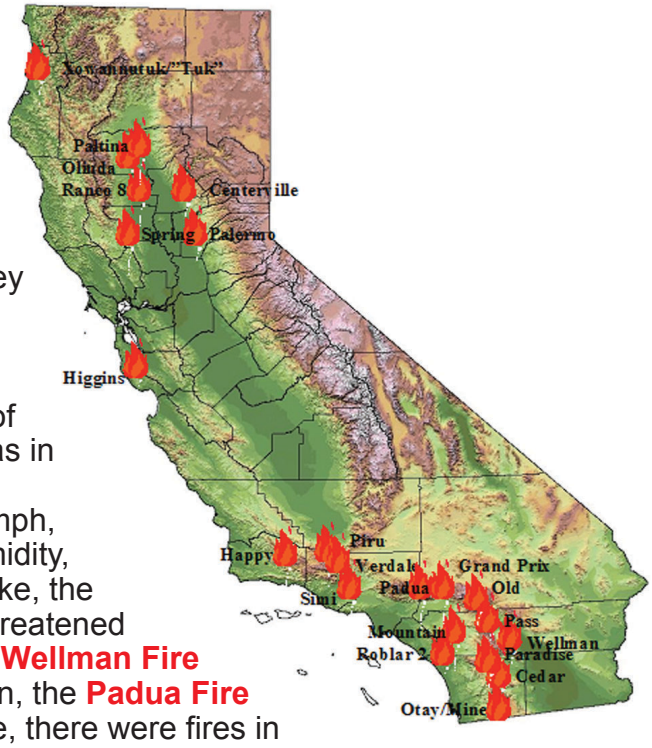
At 3:30 p.m., the **Piru Fire** started near the community of Ojai. Later that evening, the **Palermo Fire** broke out in Butte County. The fire rescue mutual aid system is now gathering and pulling resources from areas outside Southern California, at the same time aware of the fire risks in the northern portion of California.

Friday, October 24, 2003

Because of the extreme fire behavior of the Grand Prix Fire, Interstate 15 and 210 were closed. CDF cancelled all days off for CDF fire suppression personnel. At approximately 10:00 a.m., the **Olinda Fire** started in Shasta County. Weather in the northern region had moderate to strong northeast winds and low humidity. At 1:45 p.m., the **Verdale Fire** starts near the City of Santa Clarita in Los Angeles County. Then at 3:00 p.m., the **Rancho 8 Fire** starts in Tehema County, and later at 3:00 p.m., the **Happy Fire** starts in Santa Barbara.

Saturday, October 25, 2003

On October 25, shortly after 9:00 a.m., the **Old Fire** started in the northern portion of the city of San Bernardino. The fire conditions at the initial stage of the Old Fire were extreme, predominately a wind-driven fire. Five thousand residents were immediately threatened with this fire. At 2:00 p.m., the **Simi Fire** started near the City of Moorpark. At 5:00 p.m., CDF requested, through OES, eight National Guard helicopters to join the forces of the aerial operations occurring for the southern California fires. The **Cedar Fire** broke out at 5:30 pm in the Cleveland National Forest in San Diego County after a hunter became lost during a hunting trip. A San Diego County Sheriff's helicopter searching for the hunter spotted the blaze near Ramona, California, late in the day and requested dispatch of firefighting aircraft. Within 2 hours of the report, more than 300 firefighters were on the ground but initial entry was difficult due to the rugged terrain, roadless area, brush 10-20 fee tall, and the exact location of the fire was unknown. Due to high winds, all fixed wing aircraft and helicopters were grounded. The rate of spread was unprecedented and the fire had a major run of 30 miles in 16.5 hours (5,000 acres per hour). The Verdale Fire was reporting extreme fire behavior with winds at 20 to 30 miles per hour and gusts up to 45 miles per hour and consuming 2,000 to 3,000 acres per hour.



Sunday, October 26, 2003

At 1:30 a.m., the **Paradise Fire** begins on the Rincon Indian Reservation near the city of Valley Center in San Diego County. At 7:00 a.m., the **Otay/Mine Fire** started near the city of Otay in southern San Diego County. The Multi Agency Coordination System (MACS), which consists of local, state and federal government entities, was in charge of coordinating and reallocating all resources. By midday, with winds at 30 to 45 mph, gusts to 75 mph, 63 degrees, 10% relative humidity, and aircraft grounded due to the wind and smoke, the Cedar Fire grew to about 100,000 acres and threatened suburban San Diego homes. At 1:00 p.m., the **Wellman Fire** began in Riverside County. Later that afternoon, the **Padua Fire** started in Los Angeles County. During this time, there were fires in Shasta, Humboldt, San Luis Obispo and Butte Counties in northern California as well.

Monday, October 27, 2003

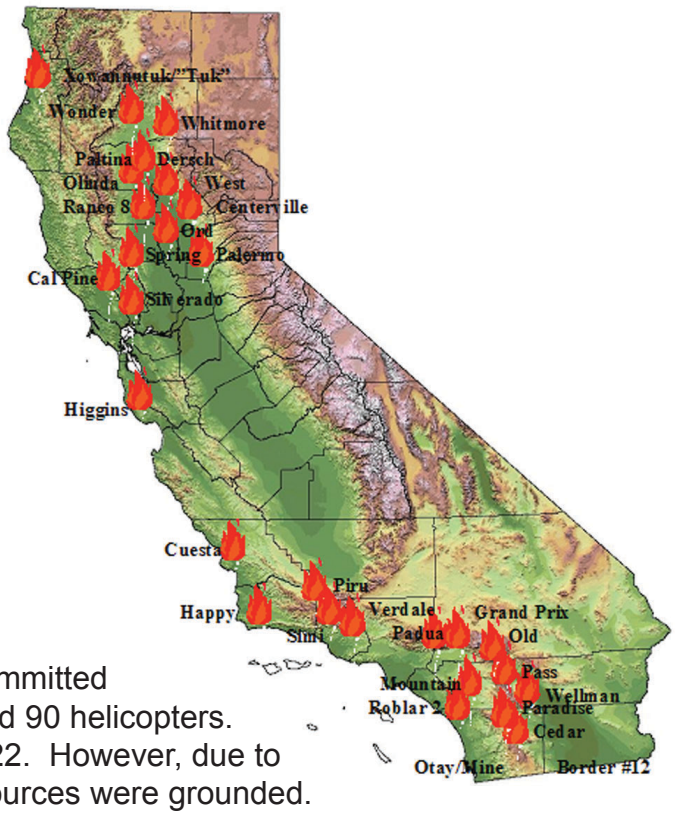
By late morning, there were no more air tankers available. Federal resources continued to be mobilized throughout the state and helicopters were requested from the Nevada National Guard. Winds at the Cedar Fire were switching between Santa Ana winds and normal on shore winds creating its own thermal convection and pushing the fire in multiple directions at the same time. Fire was spotting over major highways and roads, and flame lengths reached 200 feet.

Tuesday, October 28, 2003

In the early morning, the **Border Fire** started in southern San Diego County. Demobilization of excess Type 1 Engine Strike Teams began. Northern California continued to experience wildland fires. Oregon National Guard helicopters were requested to assist with these fires. The Cedar Fire continued to experience extremely low humidities and high temperatures, hampering firefighting efforts. Transitional winds with stronger onshore winds burned an additional 114,000 acres. Additional resources came from Arizona. In some fire areas, aircraft could not fly because of wind conditions, and some federal air tankers were grounded because of cracked windshields.

Wednesday, October 29, 2003

The majority of the fires were ongoing and the northern California fires were being contained. At 12:30 p.m., Engineer Steven Rucker, from Novato Fire Protection District, met his fate and three members of his crew were injured when they were overrun by the Cedar Fire. The Cedar Fire continued its extreme fire behavior, spotting over major roads and highways, with 200 foot flames and increased humidity to 80%. The communities of Julian, Pine Hills, Cuyamaca and Guatay were evacuated. Two more fires broke out in Northern California in Napa and Sonoma Counties.



Thursday, October 30, 2003

Military, state and federal air resources were committed totaling 208, including 104 fixed wing aircraft and 90 helicopters. Maximum number of engines committed was 722. However, due to smoke and weather conditions, most aerial resources were grounded.

Friday, October 31, 2003

Cedar, Old Fire and Simi Fire reported significant improvement in conditions due to scattered showers, higher humidity and lower temperatures. Poor visibility over most fires limited aircraft missions.

Saturday, November 1, 2003

Air remained saturated with measurable rain falling. Gained ground on Southern California fires. Fire started in Mendocino County. Nevada helicopters were released to go back home.

Sunday, November 2, 2003

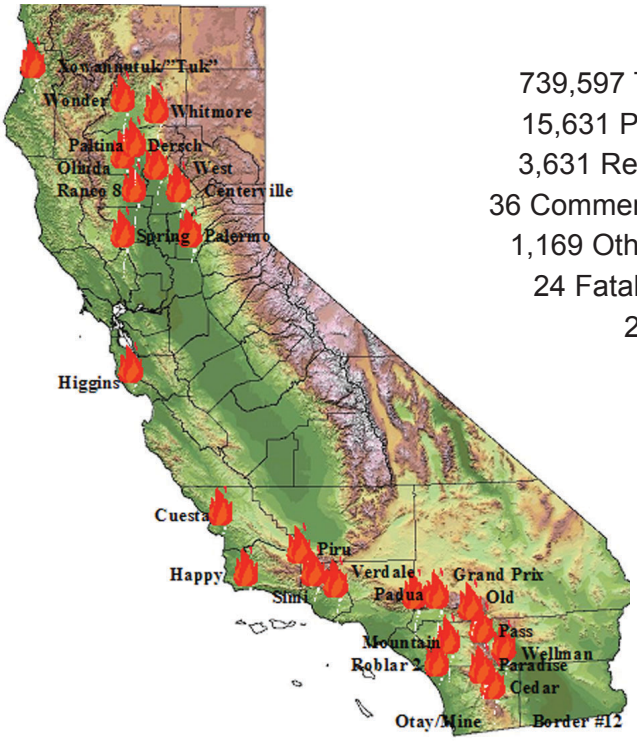
Other aircraft were released to go back to their home bases. Cedar Fire reported minor flare-ups in the fire's interior.

Monday, November 3, 2003

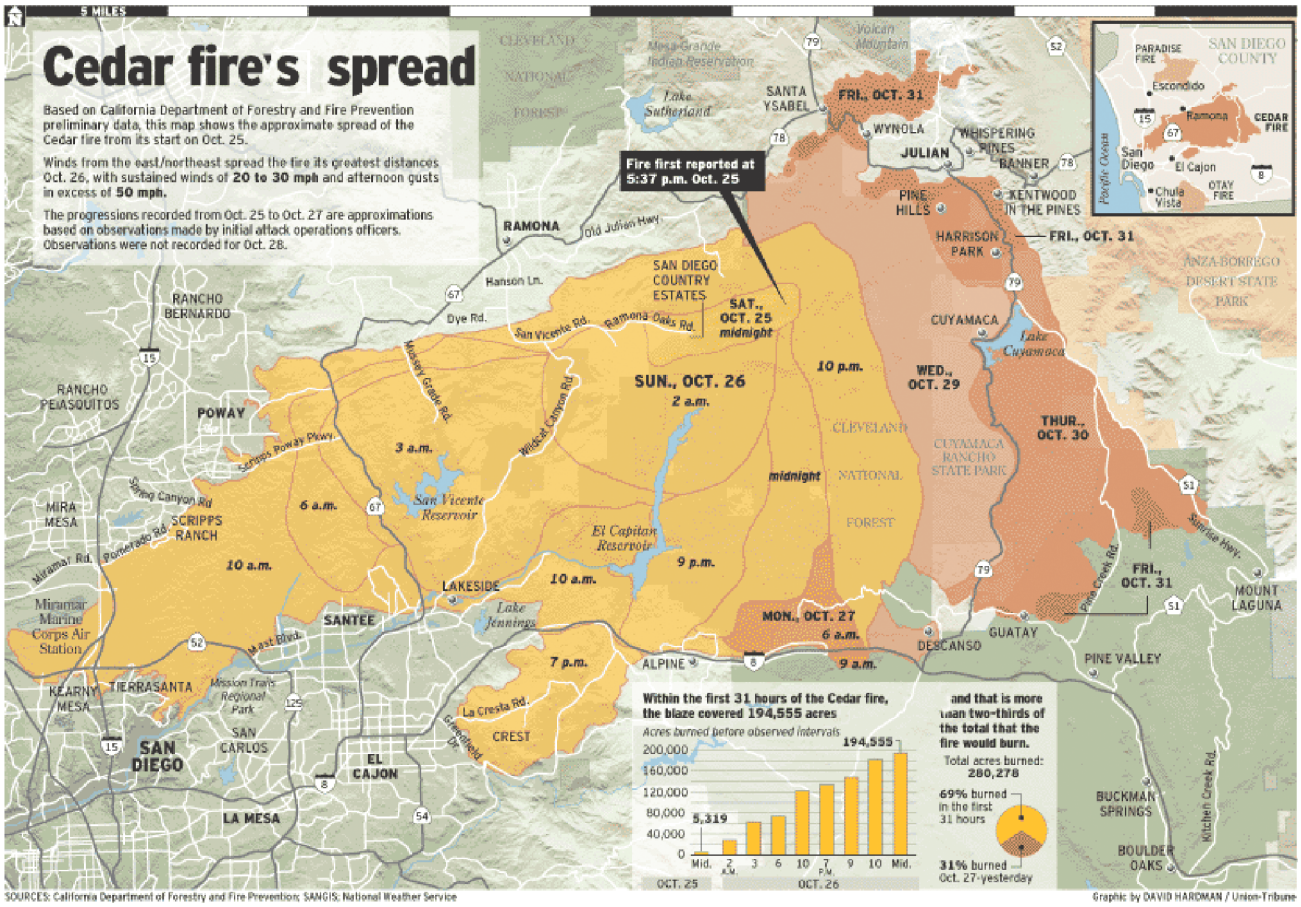
Residents returned to mountain communities on a community-by-community basis.

Tuesday, November 4, 2003

Cedar Fire contained at 6:00 p.m. This became the largest fire in California's history, killing 14 people (including one firefighter), destroying 2,232 homes and burning 273,246 acres.



739,597 Total Acres Burned
15,631 Personnel Assigned
3,631 Residence Destroyed
36 Commercial Bldgs Destroyed
1,169 Other Bldgs Destroyed
24 Fatalities, 1 Firefighter
246 Injuries



Southern California fire siege final statistics on acreage destroyed:

Wellman Fire	100 acres
Happy Fire	250 acres
Pass Fire	2,387 acres
Roblar 2 Fire	8,592 acres
Verdale Fire	8,650 acres
Mountain Fire	10,331 acres
Padua Fire	10,446 acres
Otay Fire	45,971 acres
Paradise Fire	56,700 acres
Grand Prix Fire	58,448 acres
Piru Fire	63,991 acres
Old Fire	91,281 acres
Simi Incident	108,204 acres
Cedar Fire	273,246 acres