

DISASTROUS LAGUNA FIRE OF '70 RECALLED

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CARLSBAD – Almost everyone was apprehensive that morning of Sept. 23, 1970.

One fire chief had his eye on Santa Ana conditions in Los Angeles and Orange counties, concerned that the hot, dry winds would sweep into San Diego County, where there had been little rain for months.

Another chief was even more concerned, particularly because many of his seasoned—and seasonal—firefighters had returned to school and were unavailable for duty.

As they worried, the Santa Ana winds increased, and the humidity dipped to 10 percent, down from a normal 55 to 70 percent, and the backcountry fire danger reached the critical stage.

Up north, the fires broke out, and on the morning of Sept. 26 the state Office of Emergency Services asked San Diego County to send its Civil Defense fire pumper units to Orange and Los Angeles counties.

Chief Leonard Bell of San Diego, coordinator of mutual aid for San Diego and Imperial counties, issued the order.

"Big Red," a Civil Defense pumper stationed here, was dispatched, manned by Engineer Bill Hill and Fireman Richard Walton. The department didn't see "Big Red" again for days.

In San Diego County, the humidity continued to drop.

And the Santa Ana roared in from the desert, through the mountain passes, sucking moisture from the brush, weeds and even the pine trees. Leaves were drying, curling and falling from eucalyptus trees, one of nature's own self-preservation acts designed to eliminate fuel.

As the fires burned out of control up north, fire chiefs in San Diego County began expecting the worst. Vacations were canceled and off-duty firefighters and volunteers were put on alert.

Then it happened.

Fifty-mile-an-hour winds blew a tree against a power line, which fell into tinder-dry brush near Sunrise Highway and Interstate 8 shortly after 6 a.m. Saturday, September 26. The largest brush fire in California's history—the Laguna Mountain Fire—had started and pushed on by gusts of wind that reached 80 miles per hour, raced toward Pine Valley a few miles away.

Almost immediately, the county's Mutual Aid Plan was activated by Chief Bell, and engine companies and water tankers were sent to predetermined locations.

Because the fire was in Cleveland National Forest, overall strategy at the scene was set by

then-Chief Myron Lee of the U.S. Forest Service and Assistant Chief John Caragozian.

Unfortunately, little help was available from the county's Civil Defense pumper units. Most of them were working the fires up north. The same was true for aerial tankers stationed at Ramona.

As the humidity dropped to an unbelievable 3 percent, available apparatus was massed between Pine Valley and the fire in a desperate effort to turn the flames. Firefighters, aided by a favorable wind shift, saved the town, but three homes were lost.

The fire surged in another direction, and private and municipal water tankers were pressed into service to carry water to the fire. At Bell's request, all departments in the county sent additional men and equipment to the scene. The military sent tractors and field kitchens and provided other support services.

But fire protection services throughout the county were stretched to the limit. And when it became all too apparent that a major disaster was in the making, strike teams from throughout the West were called in.

The fire raged at unbelievable speed toward Alpine, where men and equipment were massed. Sixteen homes were lost, and it was becoming physically impossible to move hoses and equipment ahead of the fire.

Flames, now spreading on a front several miles wide, roared through Harbison Canyon, Jamul and Crest.

In Crest, 114 homes were lost, including one across the street from the fire station. In Harbison Canyon, 117 homes were destroyed and, in Jamul, on the southwest edge of the fire, 40 homes went up in smoke.

The fire was consuming 4,000 acres an hour and had traveled 32 miles in 30 hours, approaching El Cajon, La Mesa and Spring Valley.

Chief Tom Owens of El Cajon, Bob Siever of La Mesa and Frank Berger of Spring Valley prepared for the worst.

Just after midnight Tuesday morning, another fire broke out near Cuyamaca, and firefighters had to be diverted to what became known as the Boulder, or Inaja, fire. In all, 200 men, 20 fire trucks and 3 bulldozers were assigned to that blaze, which burned 12,500 acres.

Smoke from the fires rose to 7,000 feet and extended along a 12-mile line to the Mexican border. On the fire line, visibility was near zero, and ashes and soot, carried on Santa Ana winds, rained on San Diego.

Small fires broke out east of Del Mar and at Bonsall, but were rapidly controlled. A fire east of Encinitas burned 500 acres and threatened the community before it was stopped at El Camino Real.

A brush fire in San Marcos destroyed 2,000 acres in a little over two hours and threatened the historic Leo Carrillo ranch home before firefighters doused the flames.

By the time it was over on Oct. 3, at least 3,000 firefighters, 17 aircraft and 200 pieces of

equipment from all over the West had been called into action.

The Laguna Mountain Fire alone scorched 185,000 acres.

Civil Defense officials reported that at least 380 homes and 1,000 other structures were destroyed. Damage to the homes alone was set at \$5.6 million.