

# Two big Calif. wildfires merge

## Firefighters making gains containing them

By Christina Almeida  
The Associated Press

YUCCA VALLEY, Calif. — Thousands of firefighters aided by aircraft yesterday worked in force to keep two big wildfires from gaining a foothold in the heavily populated San Bernardino Mountains, where millions of trees killed by drought and bark beetles could provide explosive fuel.

The lightning-caused fires, covering more than 95 square miles combined, merged yesterday afternoon. Wildfires can grow more unpredictable after merging, but the two blazes were moving slowly yesterday, and U.S. Forest Service officials said it appeared that their combination was unlikely to seriously increase fire activity.

The larger of the two fires has destroyed 45 homes and 118 outbuildings and remains a potential threat to 1,500 homes, said the Forest Service's Kristel Johnson. A 10,000-acre blaze started a week ago on the Mojave Desert, but the eastern flank of the San Bernardino, and west of the Mojave, continued.

The smaller fire had burned 8,300 acres, mostly at higher elevations. Wildfire smoke continued to fill the sky yesterday, with pushing that fire away from the mountain-top Big Bear resort region and onto areas already burned by the larger fire.

Several thousand people live in and around Big Bear Lake, which went through its last big fire in Southern California's smoggiest period of devastating wildfires in 2003.

"There's no danger to Big Bear residents; there's no imminent threat at this time," San Bernardino County Fire Department spokeswoman Tracy Martinez said. But about 25 scattered homes and a fish hatchery remained in the fire's path. The fire was hampered by steep, broken slopes and 105-degree temperatures, firefighting effects were "great," said Forest Service spokesman Jim Wilkins.



Firefighters watch a wildfire near Morongo Valley, Calif., about 120 miles east of Los Angeles yesterday.

Concerns about what would happen when the fires merged had focused on the possibility of an ultra-hot fire front that could create its own unpredictable winds, but a merger also can create firebreaks by quickly burning up brush in each fire's path. "It's going to burn each other out in that area," Ms. Martinez predicted.

In nearby Pomona, where a former Western movie locale where the larger fire burned several homes this week, a 20-person search-and-rescue team headed out yesterday to look for a 57-year-old man missing since Tuesday. The wife of Jerry Gutierrez reported him missing.

Meanwhile, in southern Montana, mostly east of Billings, firefighters were battling three major fires totaling close

to 150,000 acres, or more than 200 square miles. The estimate on the largest fire nearly tripled overnight, fire information officer Paula Rosenthal said.

More than 200 structures, more than 80 of them homes, were threatened by the fires, and another blaze near Ashland destroyed at least one house. Firefighters yesterday were close to containing a wildfire that destroyed five buildings earlier this week.

Meteorologists had had news for firefighters in southern Montana and California's Mojave Desert and foothills: Both parched areas were expected to see weekend thunderstorms that could trigger more lightning-caused wildfires.

Other wildfires included an 850-acre blaze that forced the closure of southern Nevada's Cleaver Dam State Park since lightning started it late Tuesday.

# Pa. town moves to stem growth of immigrants

By Daniel Patrick Sheehan  
The (Harrisburg, Pa.) Morning Call

HAZLETON, Pa. — Sweating heavily because of the high-contrast television lights — and, perhaps, because of the bulletproof vest he wore under his tattered white shirt — Hazleton Mayor Louis Barletta proclaimed Thursday a historic day: the beginning of an organized resistance to illegal immigration.

Despite impassioned pleas from Hispanic leaders and community activists, including one who said Hazleton was on its way to becoming America's first "Nazi city," the council voted 4-1 to approve an ordinance targeting illegals that is believed to be the toughest of its kind in the country and is being used as a model elsewhere in Pennsylvania and in Florida and California.

Unless the new law is overturned by court challenge — and it faces a certain lawsuit — Hazleton will begin punishing employers who hire illegal immigrants and landlords who rent to them. And, from now on, all official written business in this old Luzerne County coal region city must be conducted in English.

Leaders fretted that the ordinance must be viewed outside the context of the city's racial makeup, but it is indisputable that most of the illegals under discussion lately are members of a Hispanic population that has grown explosively in the past six years.

Dominicans, Mexicans, Salvadorans and natives of a dozen other Spanish-speaking nations have flocked to Hazleton, lured by cheap housing and the promise of plentiful jobs at the area's industrial parks. Many have come to eastern Pennsylvania from New York City, fleeing the high cost of living and the pervasive sense of insecurity that followed the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Tensions have grown ever higher as the largely white and traditionally insular city of about 30,000 has made room for Spanish-speakers who, many say, seem determined to resist assimilation.

In an interview with The Morning Call last

summer, Mr. Barletta gave an upbeat assessment of the immigrant presence, comparing it with previous waves of immigration from Europe that included his own Italian forebears. But shaken by a homicide, a playground shooting and other crimes involving illegals, he drafted the Illegal Immigration Relief Act. Using it on a similar act proposed in San Bernardino, Calif.

While San Bernardino's effort is hung up on court on a legal challenge, other communities are following Hazleton's lead. Avon Park and Palm Bay in Florida both are scheduled to vote later this month on bills modeled after Hazleton's. In Escondido, Calif., a councilwoman has proposed a bill based on Hazleton's. And on Tuesday, supervisors in Hazle Township, which surrounds Hazleton and has about 9,200 residents, approved a measure similar to the city's.

"What you saw here tonight was a city that wants to take back what we've given here," said Mr. Barletta, who wore the bulletproof vest as part of extraordinary security measures that included temporary metal detectors at the entrance to City Hall. The mayor said he had received no threats, but took the precautions because of the fierce emotions engendered by the debate.

The ordinance requires prospective tenants to obtain an occupancy permit at City Hall. Landlords who are discovered renting to people without such permits face a \$1,000-a-day fine. Employers who hire illegals can lose their business permits, city contracts or grants for five years on the first offense and 10 years on the second.

In a scorching City Hall chamber, 11 speakers rose to challenge the ordinance or urge its adoption. The standing-room-only crowd was firmly behind it, treating Mr. Barletta to an ovation when he entered the room.

Anna Actis, a Dominican native who works for Catholic Social Services, called the ordinance biased and racist. "If you pass this, you will go down in history as the council that made this city the first Nazi city in the country," she said, drawing catcalls.

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# Air show snafu will be solved

AIRPORT, FROM PAGE A-1

On July 6, BI use Angel practice runs closed the airspace around the airport from 11 a.m. to noon, 1 to 2 p.m., and 3 to 4 p.m. During that time, US Airways' largest carrier, was forced to delay nine flights. A spokesman said at the time all of the flights had pulled away from the gate on time but were held on the runway by air traffic control.

Other airlines also encountered delays. Col. Randy Bright, commander of the 911th Air Lift Wing, which hosts the air show, said in a e-mail response to questions that he is in agreement with the policy to give commercial flights preference.

He said the policy was in effect for last week's show but was "overcome by a misunderstanding between the tower, the air show air boss and the Blue Angels."

"This was immediately and swiftly dealt with to prevent any problems during the actual show on Saturday and Sunday," he said.

He added the 911th will continue to work closely with airport officials to make sure "we are in compliance with scheduled airspace closures" in the future. He said he wasn't aware of any commercial traffic wanting to take off or trying to land during any of last week's closures.

Mr. George said the airport authority plans to meet with the airlines, the 911th, and the Federal Aviation Administration, which operates the air traffic control tower, to discuss ways to make improvements and prevent similar problems in the future.

"We have to clean up, coordinate, communicate and eliminate as many of these delays as possible," he said.

The discussions likely will determine whether

future shows will be held, he said. Mr. George added the authority and its board would like to see them continue "but we have to safeguard commercial traffic."

Col. Bright said the 911th is planning to produce Wings Over Pittsburgh next year.

He said it is hoping to coordinate with the airport authority, the county and the city to ensure that no other major events are scheduled during the week of the air show.

This year, the show competed with the Major League Baseball All-Star Game and other events for attention, and that may have contributed to problems in getting the word about airspace and road closings, he said.

"We were dramatically impacted this year with Fleet Week and the All-Star game as far as getting the attention of the media to help inform the public about airfield and road closures," he said.

The 911th also will be working to lessen the air show's impact on commercial traffic, he said.

While the airport authority is looking to cut delays in the skies, Mr. George said there was little that could be done about those on the ground.

Portions of Business Route 60 were closed during Blue Angels performances and practices, jamming local roads and forcing motorists to stay in traffic for long periods.

Mr. George said the closings were a safety precaution because of the proximity of a main runway to Business Route 60. He said he did not see that changing.

"We don't want people to be hurt. It's a safety issue," he said.

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