

37 Homes Lost to San Luis Obispo Fire

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AUGUST 17, 1994 | SAN LUIS OBISPO

More than 1,700 firefighters from throughout the state battled the worst California wildfire of the season Tuesday, an arson-sparked blaze in rural, hilly San Luis Obispo County that has claimed 37 homes and scorched 45,500 acres.

The Highway 41 fire--so dubbed because of its danger to the state highway that links scenic California 1 and U.S. 101 near Atascadero--is the "most high-priority fire" in the state, said Thomas Williams, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry.

But it is not the only fire burning across California. The Devil Creek fire north of Lake Arrowhead was contained about 4 p.m. Tuesday after charring 1,800 acres. The Horizon fire in Yosemite National Park and adjoining parts of Mariposa County was contained earlier in the day after burning 2,860 acres. A fast-moving fire had blackened more than 1,000 acres near Mt. Baldy by late Tuesday, and several hundred firefighters battled a 430-acre wildfire above the scenic Mendocino coastline.

"This is going to be a tight squeeze between now and the rainy season," Richard Wilson, Department of Forestry director, said during a briefing at the fire command post Tuesday afternoon. "We've got our hands full."

Although the Highway 41 fire burned no structures in the city of San Luis Obispo, it threatened several neighborhoods with about 100 houses and caused early morning evacuations, said Jim Dunn, city administrator.

"This morning it looked very bad," Dunn said Tuesday afternoon. "In the early morning hours we evacuated the Monterey Heights area of the city just southeast of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and we also evacuated the dormitories and other buildings at Cal Poly. Fortunately that part of the fire was brought under control in the late morning. The people have been allowed to go back into their homes in that area."

The nearby city of Santa Margarita was evacuated Monday. Residents were allowed to return to their homes Tuesday morning, only to be warned to leave again before nightfall. Sharon Parker, who lives in the area, nearly lost her home Monday night.

"The fire crossed (U.S. 101) and burned right up the fields next to our house," Parker said. "If it hadn't been for neighbors with tractors and shovels and hoses, we probably would have lost our house. . . . I had never heard a fire before. It roared down the hill and trees were exploding and it burned up the field and came within 40 feet of our house."

No business areas in San Luis Obispo County have been affected, said Department of Forestry spokesman Bob Bergstrom, but the rolling grasslands that feed a thriving ranching industry were destroyed.

"When you're burning grassland, for a cattleman that's his feed," Bergstrom said. "It's like burning dollar bills."

Many of the evacuees from Santa Margarita fled to Paso Robles, 15 miles north, where they sought shelter at the Paso Robles Inn. Crystal McCann, hotel vice president and general manager, said her business was completely booked Monday--a rarity.

"We have 70 rooms here, and last night we had all filled," she said. "We usually run about a 48% occupancy rate. We've had rabbits and birds and we even had one person come with a duck and we let them in. What can you do?"

In this case, what the inn did was let fire evacuees sleep for free. "We comped last night 66 out of 70 rooms," McCann said. "People don't have places to go and you can't turn them out."

Most of the 37 homes burned Tuesday were in the Tassajara Creek area about six miles north of San Luis Obispo, a steep, wooded canyon surrounded by thick brush.

The fire, which sent a heavy plume of smoke 15,000 feet above San Luis Obispo, burned within several hundred yards of the California Men's Colony, a nearby state prison. During a frantic six hours Monday, it raced across 30,000 acres, officials said.

Power was returned to all but 2,000 [Pacific Gas & Electric Co.](#) customers by Tuesday night, after 110,000 lost electricity when the fire raged into the area Monday, said company spokesman Shawn Cooper.

The fire was set by an arsonist about 4 p.m. Sunday near Morro Bay, Bergstrom said. An ignition device was found, but no suspect has been identified.

Highway 101, which had been closed since 5 p.m. Monday, was reopened in both directions by 11 p.m. Tuesday.

The fire also brought out the politicians, as Democratic candidate for governor Kathleen Brown and Rep. Mike Huffington (R-Santa Barbara), who is running for U.S. Senate, flew to the fire command post, and Gov. Pete Wilson, campaigning in Los Angeles, lauded the efforts of firefighters, who had the blaze 30% contained by late Tuesday.

Arianna Huffington, the candidate's wife, also came to the fire scene Tuesday afternoon when she heard a broadcast that firefighters were suffering dehydration. She chartered a plane from Los Angeles International Airport loaded with water bottles and arrived in San Luis Obispo about 3:30 p.m.

Times staff writer Dave Leshner contributed to this story.