



NEWS



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Early-morning fire erupts in Fontana

Mike Myers, Fontana Herald News

Posted: Saturday, March 4, 2017 7:25 AM



Fire trucks responded to the 8600 block of Hemlock Avenue to extinguish a fire on March 4. (Contributed photo by Mike Myers)

An early-morning fire erupted in the 8600 block of Hemlock Avenue in Fontana on March 4, but it was quickly extinguished and there were no injuries, according to the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**.

At about 12:23 a.m., the Fire Department received calls of a semi-truck on fire. The first engine to arrive on scene discovered a 900-square foot abandoned residence at the back of the lot. The structure was fully engulfed in flames.

Fire Captain Michael Murphy said the firefighters immediately took a defensive approach to fighting the fire and to protect the surrounding structures.

About 25 firefighters put out the blaze in approximately 20 minutes. The loss was limited to the abandoned structure. About 2:30 a.m., the overhaul of the fire was completed.

There was a brief closure of Hemlock so firefighters could get their equipment in.

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

http://www.fontanaheraldnews.com/news/early-morning-fire-erupts-in-fontana/article_d5ae7ec0-00ee-11e7-a6a5-fbe954ba2836.html

Fire guts vacant Fontana home

Beatriz Valenzuela, San Bernardino Sun

Posted: March 6, 2017, 7:54 AM

FONTANA >> Authorities are investigating the cause of a fire that tore through a vacant Fontana home late Sunday night.

The blaze gutted the home in the 17200 block of Pine Avenue just before midnight, according to Ryan Vaccaro, spokesman for the San Bernardino County Fire Department.

No one was injured in the fire, but the single-story home was a complete loss, he said.

Temperatures dipped into the mid- to upper 30s Sunday night into Monday morning, but Vaccaro said it wasn't clear if transients lighting warming fires were to blame for the fire.

"It's still under investigation at this point," he said.

<http://www.sbsun.com/general-news/20170306/fire-guts-vacant-fontana-home>

This is what caused the Pilot fire near Silverwood Lake 8 months ago

Doug Saunders, The Sun

Posted: March 3, 2017, 11:14 AM



In this file photo, airtankers battle the Pilot fire as it burns in Summit Valley near Silverwood Lake Aug. 8, 2016. File photo by Rachel Luna/Staff Photographer

SUMMIT VALLEY >> Federal fire officials Friday released their findings into the cause of the 2016 Pilot fire that charred more than 8,000 acres of the San Bernardino National Forest.

“The Pilot fire was a result of a vehicle fire,” San Bernardino National Forest Service spokesman John Miller said in an emailed statement Friday.

The vehicle was described by homeowners in the burn zone at the time of the fire as an off-road All Terrain Vehicle. Fire officials didn’t confirm the make and model of the ATV.

The Pilot fire erupted Aug. 7 shortly after noon in Miller Canyon Off Highway Vehicle Area, near Highway 138 and burned everything in its path for more than a week.

Part of the Pacific Crest Trail runs near the Pilot fire burn zone and was closed during firefighting efforts.

Days after firefighters gained control of the blaze, the Blue Cut fire storm erupted along Old Cajon Boulevard which would eventually consume nearly 57 square miles (more than 37,000 acres) of terrain throughout the Cajon Pass.

When asked if investigators have determined the cause of the Blue Cut fire, Miller replied that it’s still under investigation.

<http://www.sbsun.com/general-news/20170303/this-is-what-caused-the-pilot-fire-near-silverwood-lake-8-months-ago>

Blaze burns through garage, vehicles in Hesperia home late Thursday

Paola Baker, Daily Press

Posted: March 3, 2017, 5:32 PM



Firefighters battled a blaze that burned through a detached garage and several vehicles at a home in Hesperia late Thursday. Despite a reported threat to the home, the flames didn't spread further and authorities said no injuries were reported. [David Pardo, Daily Press]

HESPERIA — Firefighters fought a blaze that tore through a box trailer and detached garage of a home late Thursday, authorities said.

Reports of a structure fire at a home in the 19200 block of Cypress Avenue were received by **San Bernardino County Fire Department** firefighters at 6:16 p.m. County Fire officials said firefighters arrived and found a detached garage fully engulfed in flames.

County Fire spokesman Ryan Vaccaro told the Daily Press the blaze was believed to have started in a box trailer "filled with mechanic tools" in the backyard of the home. The flames then spread to the garage, burning through the structure and some vehicles on the property.

Officials closed off Cypress Avenue between Sequoia and Manzanita streets as firefighters worked to knock down the blaze. Heavy smoke could be seen throughout the block as the flames continued to spread.

Fearing the home would be exposed to the flames, firefighters initiated a defensive attack to combat the blaze. They were successful in preventing the flames from spreading into the home. Vaccaro said the fire was reported to be knocked down by 6:42 p.m. Thursday.

Several County Fire personnel, including four medic engines, two ladder trucks, a paramedic ambulance and a chief officer were dispatched to combat the blaze. No injuries were reported, Vaccaro said.

The cause of the blaze remains under investigation by the San Bernardino County Fire Department.

<http://www.vvdailynews.com/news/20170303/blaze-burns-through-garage-vehicles-in-hesperia-home-late-thursday>

Here's why Riverside County might make cuts to fire service

Jeff Horseman, Press Enterprise

Posted: March 3, 2017, 11:08 PM



Fire Chief John Hawkins said he's trying to balance the need to protect the public with doing his part to help the county fix its finances. KURT MILLER, FILE PHOTO

Staffing cuts, closing a fire station, doing away with a hazardous materials team and a handful of smaller firefighter units are some of the suggestions offered by Riverside County's fire chief to solve an ongoing budget crunch.

Chief John Hawkins also suggests charging patients served by Cal Fire on medical calls. The chief's recommendations are part of a report to be presented to the county Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, March 7.

The union representing firefighters is encouraging members to attend Tuesday's meeting to show their disapproval of the proposed cuts. Firefighters already have an unsustainable workload and the cuts would make things worse, said Mike Alvarado, Riverside district vice president for Cal Fire Local 2881.

In a telephone interview, Hawkins said he's trying to balance the need to protect the public with doing his part to help the county fix its finances.

"Riverside County is honestly challenged with impacts to revenues and I clearly understand that as the fire chief and a county department head ... we've got to be part of the system," Hawkins said. "It is what it is and we've got to make it work."

It's up to the county's four elected supervisors -- there's a vacancy due to John Benoit's passing -- to decide whether to move forward with Hawkins' suggestions.

The Riverside County Fire Department, like much of county government, continues to struggle with costs outpacing revenue. Combined, these costs, which include a projected \$44 million hit from the state shifting the cost of in-home care for adults and costs associated with an upcoming jail expansion, could cause the county's budget shortfall to exceed \$100 million.

The current Fire Department shortfall is more than \$2 million. The county is served by about 1,250 Cal Fire personnel.

The county has a contract with Cal Fire, a state agency, for fire protection. Many cities have their own contracts with Cal Fire that guarantee a set level of service, so the cuts would be felt the most in the county's unincorporated areas.

A 2014 salary survey found that pay for Cal Fire firefighters lags behind 20 other agencies by as much as 40 percent, and a tentative deal between Cal Fire and the union representing firefighters would boost base pay between 9 and 23 percent over four years.

For the county, that contract and a higher state minimum wage come out to a \$2.5 million increase this fiscal year and \$11.8 million in higher labor costs for firefighters starting in fiscal 2017-18.

County Executive Officer Jay Orr warned of potential cuts to fire service in a recent letter to supervisors.

"With increasing demand for scarce resources, the Board should address whether we can sustain the current service levels in all our areas of operation," Orr wrote. "For example, the increasing labor costs for Cal Fire begs the question of whether we can afford our existing model of service delivery."

County officials also have chafed at the administrative fee Cal Fire charges from Sacramento. The fee could approach \$21 million next fiscal year, which starts July 1.

Three to two

Supervisors asked Hawkins to draw up a list of ways to save money and raise revenue. His 22-page report recommends taking four or five engines staffed by three firefighters and converting them to two-person units capable of responding to medical emergencies and small fires.

Hawkins acknowledged the new staffing model has drawbacks.

"Due to the staffing level of one company officer and one paramedic firefighter, the medic patrol will not be able to engage in an aggressive interior fire attack upon its arrival at a working structure fire," he wrote in his report.

Help for cardiac arrest patients also would be affected, Hawkins wrote. "The performance of basic life support requires the dedication of two rescuers to perform effective CPR," he wrote.

"While one rescuer performs chest compressions the other is dedicated to breathing for the patient ... clearly there are no sufficient rescuers to initiate advanced life support as well. Ideally chest compressions, airway management, and advanced life support are performed simultaneously."

Going from three-firefighter engines to two-person units is a bad idea that compromises public safety, Alvarado said

"The citizens of Riverside County, they deserve the best and the standard of the best is three people on an engine company," he said. "Having these medic patrol units, in essence, we're going backward and we're not providing the best service we possibly can."

The report proposes saving \$1.8 million by closing the Poppet Flats fire station between Banning and Idyllwild. Other suggestions include saving \$1.5 million by eliminating one of two HAZMAT teams and saving \$470,000 by not filling vacant battalion chief and division chief positions.

EMS costs

In all, 42 positions, including vacant jobs, are on the chopping block. Hawkins said the goal might be attainable through attrition and by reassigning personnel to other parts of the Cal Fire system.

The report finds that \$3.6 million could be raised by recouping the cost of emergency medical services provided to patients.

The idea is to seek cost recovery from patients' health insurance and no one would be denied medical care if they can't pay, Hawkins said, adding that 83 percent of his department's calls are for pre-hospital medical emergencies.

<http://www.pe.com/articles/cuts-826762-fire-make.html>

Sharp spike in retirement costs behind Barstow Fire district's financial issues

Paola Baker, Daily Press

Posted: March 4, 2017, 12:01 AM

BARSTOW — As the City Council presents measures intended to keep the Barstow Fire Protection District solvent, a look at city reports reveals a sharp rise in retirement costs is a primary factor in the district's ongoing financial issues.

At last Tuesday's BFPD sustainability workshop, City Council members weighed several options, including annexation of the district's fire services to the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**, but ultimately decided to place a half-cent sales tax measure on the ballot instead.

The half-cent sales tax hike could generate an estimated \$3.8 million per year, with residents paying an average of \$47 a year, according to city officials. It would be a special purpose tax, requiring two-thirds approval of Barstow voters.

At last week's workshop, BFPD Interim Chief Jamie Williams gave a brief presentation in which the district's current standing was discussed. She opened with a quick look at the district's beginnings and how things have changed since then.

According to Williams, the BFPD began in 1926 as a "total volunteer group" serving a population of 1,000 people in a four-square mile area. The district has now expanded to service an area of approximately 60 square miles, while the population served has boomed to 50,000.

While these increases also have affected the district's sustainability, the report showed that a majority of the deficit is due to retirement costs.

The district's retirement benefits have been part of a small retirement pool with San Bernardino County Employees' Retirement Association (SBCERA), but planned on moving to a California Public Employees'

Retirement System (CalPERS) pool. Recent changes with CalPERS, however, have led to an increase in net pension liability, according to a representative with the city's independent auditing firm.

A pension liability can be explained as the difference between the total amount due to retirees and the actual amount of money available to make those payments.

The rise has led to a sharp spike in the amount of employer contributions to the retirement fund. According to the figures presented by Williams, BFPD firefighters pay employer contributions for anything over 45.3 percent.

The workshop presented various options to help with these rising costs, such as transitioning to CalPERS under the city's contract and transitioning to a larger SBCERA county safety pool. The latter option appeared to be preferable as the county safety pool is larger and more stable than the smaller, more volatile CalPERS pool, city officials said.

The transition to the county safety SBCERA pool would cost the fire district \$9.1 million, but city officials were able to create a payment plan with county officials to help offset some of that cost, according to Assistant City Manager Cindy Prothro.

"We had the right audience, apparently, with SBCERA and we asked, 'what would it cost to transition from (the smaller) safety pool to county safety, and can we?'" Prothro said. "And the answer we got back from their attorney was, 'I don't see why not, nobody's done it this way but we'll look into it.' So that started the ball rolling with the initial estimate."

Prothro said the transition estimates and payment plan were established during another meeting with SBCERA in December. The payment plan would consist of annual payments of \$833,000 for 20 years.

The recommendation to transition to the SBCERA county safety pool, along with the sales tax measure, were approved by the fire board to be presented at the next City Council and BFPD meeting.

A \$900,000 loan agreement between the city and BFPD also was recommended. Funds from the loan will be used for the initial \$833,000 pension payment. Leftover funds will be used to fund the BFPD's increased retirement contribution for the remainder of the fiscal year.

All recommendations were approved with unanimous votes.

"I think this came from all of us on this dais putting pressure to county supervisors to ask the question of why we're in this, and how do we fix it," Mayor Julie Hackbarth-McIntyre said.

<http://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20170304/sharp-spike-in-retirement-costs-behind-barstow-fire-districts-financial-issues>

More than 80 percent of all wildfires caused by humans, new study says

Alex Groves, The Press-Enterprise

Posted: March 5, 2017, 9:34 PM



A helicopter makes a water drop onto the southern edge of the Blue Cut Fire as it burns off of Cajon Blvd near Kenwood Thursday August 18, 2016. A new study shows that humans may be largely responsible for many of the U.S. Wildfires that happen, either by accident or on purpose. Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

People have triggered five out of six wildfires in the U.S. over the last two decades, tripling the length of the wildfire season and making it start earlier in the East and last longer in the West, a new study finds.

Even as climate change worsens the nation's fire season — making it longer and easier to burn more acres — researchers said human activities play an even bigger role.

Many of the biggest fires in the Inland region's recent history, such as 2003's Old fire and 2006's Esperanza fire were the direct result of human activity.

In Southern California, large populations living in close proximity to fire-prone foothills and national forests make the region a poster child for human-caused wildfires that wreak havoc on life and property, said lead author Jennifer Balch, a fire ecologist with University of Colorado-Boulder.

“This problem isn't going to go away,” she said during an interview Monday. “We spend over \$2 billion a year fighting fires. We will have more and more people living in this mix between houses and wildlands by the year 2030.”

While fire experts have long blamed people more than lightning, the new work details the extent of human-caused ignitions and how they interact with global warming to make matters worse.

Scientists analyzing fire data from 1992 to 2012 found that 84 percent of all U.S. wildfires — but only 44 percent of the total acres burned — were started by people, either by accident or on purpose. And human-caused blazes have more than tripled the length of the wildfire season from 46 days to 154 days, according to a study in Monday's journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

“People are moving more and more into natural wild areas and essentially providing ignition for wildfires,” said Balch. The result? Fire seasons can be year-round, as long as people are around, she said.

Liz Brown, a spokeswoman for Cal Fire in San Bernardino, said in early September that most fires are human-caused and start by accident. Only about 5 percent of human-caused fires are set deliberately, she said.

The spark

Of the more than 1 million human-started fires since 1992, about 29 percent began by trash burning, another 21 percent were arson and 11 percent were from misuse of equipment, Balch said.

Last year's Soberanes fire near Monterey was sparked by an illegal campfire and burned for nearly three months. The blaze surpassed \$200 million in firefighting costs, the most expensive in U.S. history.

One out of every five wildfires occurs on the Fourth of July from fireworks, Balch said.
The human connection

On Oct. 25, 2003, a 91,000-acre inferno dubbed the Old fire, ignited by convicted arsonist Rickie Lee Fowler near Waterman Canyon, marched through the San Bernardino National Forest toward Lake Arrowhead after it destroyed homes in San Bernardino.

The Old fire would eventually burn through more than 1,000 structures and cause the deaths of six people between Oct. 25 and Nov. 2 of that year. Many of the blackened husks of houses left behind in the Old fire's wake have been replaced with new homes in northern San Bernardino, although standing chimneys and foundations remain in areas such as Cedar Glen.

On Oct. 26, 2006 arsonist Raymond Lee Oyler started the Esperanza fire near Cabazon. The blaze was quickly swept up by the Santa Ana Winds and into the San Jacinto Mountains.

It claimed the lives of five U.S. Forest Service firefighters, destroyed 34 homes and burned through 40,200 acres before it was fully contained.

More recently, the Blue Cut fire rapidly spread after erupting along Old Cajon Boulevard in August, consuming nearly 57 square miles (more than 37,000 acres) of terrain throughout the Cajon Pass.

Ronnie Moore's home is one of the more than 100 structures damaged or destroyed by the fire's furious flames as it ripped through the Highway 138 corridor in the High Desert.

"I tried to run back in to save some things," Moore said. "But the smoke and flames were so hot, I couldn't make it."

Moore and his family narrowly escaped with their lives as flames quickly approached and eventually destroyed their home. Sitting along the highway, the Moores watched in horror as their home and all they owned burned to the ground. However, six-months after the firestorm that wreaked so much havoc in the desert community was officially considered extinguished, officials at the U.S. Forest Service, who are investigating the incident, have not determined if the blaze was sparked by human hands.

Several calls and emails to USFS officials for comment went unanswered.

The hottest spots

The Southeast is a hot spot for human-triggered wildfires. Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee had fire seasons that lasted more than 200 days and 99 percent of the wildfires in those states are caused by people.

The region is home to swaths of forests with trees that don't catch fire easily or naturally so people are the main culprits, said study co-author Adam Mahood.

The climate connection

Climate change has lengthened the U.S. fire season by a few weeks, which is dwarfed by what humans do. But the study shows how both human-sparked flames and man-made climate change work together to make America burn more, especially during more frequent dry, hot weather.

“If a campfire grows out of control during a wet, cool period, then it probably isn't going to grow into a large wildfire,” said University of Utah fire scientist Philip Dennison, who wasn't part of the study. “Climate change loads the dice toward warmer, drier conditions that make it more likely that a fire will develop from human-caused ignitions.”

Fire danger near normal

Recent rains have added new grasses to foothills and canyons within the San Bernardino Mountains, San Gabriel Mountains and Santa Monica Mountains. While the grasses hold more moisture, they can quickly dry out after a hot summer and fall, Balch said.

“Moisture during winter and early spring allow grasses to grow. If that is coupled with a very dry season then you can get significant fires,” she said.

The change from five years of drought to a surplus of rains have sharply reduced the probability of winter fires to near zero in Southern California, according to the National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook released by the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho on Feb. 1. The forecast says grasses and soils will retain enough moisture to ward off a severe fire season through summer or later. The group casts the fire potential through May as normal.

<http://www.pe.com/articles/season-826879-five-six.html>

UPDATE: Dive Team search for Noah Abbott has concluded. Traffic collision investigation is ongoing

Highland News

Posted: March 6, 2017, 7:15 AM

VICTIMS: Christina Eileen Estrada (deceased), age 31; Jeremiah Robert Abbott (deceased), age 3; Elijah Estrada (remains in the hospital in stable condition), age 10; Noah Abbott (missing, search continues), age 2, all residents of Hesperia.

On Saturday, March 4th, at approximately 8:30 a.m., Dive Team members continued in the search for missing 2-year old Noah Abbott in the aqueduct. Dive Team members searched south of the Main Street Bridge with four dive team members in the water and one on each side of the aqueduct guiding the divers forward. There was zero visibility in the water for the divers. At approximately 2:00 p.m., the team was removed from the water due to unsafe conditions (water pressure/current pressure was returned to full flow).

Since the collision on the evening of March 2nd, the underwater search has spanned, north of the Main Street bridge, all the way south to Maple Avenue. Dive Team members covered an area of 2.5 miles of the 7-mile aqueduct. Sheriff's Aviation Patrol helicopter has assisted dive team members during the search. Unfortunately, Noah has not been located, and the search in the aqueduct has concluded.

Deputies assigned to the Hesperia Police Department will continue to patrol the roadway that runs parallel to the aqueduct. Patrol deputies will immediately contact Dive Team members if there is a sighting.

The Sheriff's Department Dive Team is comprised of highly trained Deputy Sheriffs who are committed to serving the families of such tragedies. Team members worked tirelessly and take it personally when they are not able to complete their mission.

The MAIT investigation is ongoing, and the cause of the collision remains under investigation. Elijah Estrada has been released from the hospital and is continuing to recover at home with his family.

Updates will be provided as they become available.

On Thursday, March 2, 2017, at approximately 6:40 p.m., deputies from the Hesperia Police Department and paramedics from the **San Bernardino County Fire Department** responded to a vehicle collision where the car became fully submerged in the aqueduct at Main Street and Escondido. Upon arrival, 10-year-old Elijah Estrada was found in the aqueduct holding onto floatation buoys with injuries. He informed deputies that there were three more persons inside the vehicle. Elijah was transported to a local area hospital where he continues to recover from his injuries.

The vehicle described as red Volkswagen convertible was not visible, as it was fully submerged in the water. Sheriff's aviation 40K2 responded to assist in the search. Sheriff's Dive Team members and deputies from the Hesperia Major Accident Investigation Team responded to the scene.

Dive team members located 3-year-old Jeremiah Abbott unconscious in the water. Jeremiah was transported to a local area hospital where he was pronounced deceased.

The vehicle was located and removed from the water. The driver, Christina Estrada, was found inside the vehicle and pronounced deceased at the scene.

Dive Team members continued to search the aqueduct for 2-year-old Noah Abbott. Search efforts were suspended at approximately 11:30 p.m., due to darkness and visibility.

On Friday, March 3rd at approximately 8:00 a.m., Sheriff's Dive Team members resumed the search for the missing child. The search began just north of the Main Street bridge and moved south. Dive Team members have searched over one mile of the 6-mile aqueduct. At approximately 2:00 p.m., the search was suspended for the day. The search will continue Saturday morning at approximately 8:00 a.m., south of the Main Street bridge.

Deputies from the Major Accident Investigation Team are investigating the incident. There is nothing to suggest that this is anything other than a very tragic accident.

Updates will be provided as they are available for release.

Anyone with information regarding this incident is urged to contact Hesperia Police Department (760) 947-1500 or Sheriff's Dispatch at (760) 956-5001. Callers wishing to remain anonymous are urged to call the We-Tip Hotline at 1-800-78-CRIME (27463), or you may leave information on the We-Tip Hotline at www.wetip.com.

http://www.highlandnews.net/news/crime_and_fire/update-dive-team-search-for-noah-abbott-has-concluded-traffic/article_c9a8a12c-027f-11e7-8265-8330629c4506.html