

October 26, 2007

President Visits Scene and Promises Help

By [JENNIFER STEINHAUER](#)

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 25 — President Bush toured Southern California on Thursday as investigators got down to the work of determining how one sunny fall day last weekend erupted into a 16-fire storm now in its fifth day.

Recovery crews, moving from house to house in towns where the fires have passed, found the bodies of two people in the shell of a home near Poway, northeast of San Diego. And in the early evening, San Diego officials said, border patrol agents found the charred remains of four immigrants who may have been killed after crossing the Mexican border.

They were the first confirmed fatalities since Sunday, when a man was killed in Potrero, not far from the border — but unlikely to be the last, officials said.

“I imagine we will be finding bodies into next year,” said Sgt. Mike Radovich of the San Diego Sheriff’s Department.

Mr. Bush, joined by Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), also a Republican, visited the charred remains of neighborhoods, met distraught residents and exhausted fire crews and viewed fires that continue to burn throughout the region. By Thursday, the fires had destroyed 1,800 homes, injured 57 people and burned a half-million acres, a little more than twice the size of New York City.

The president pointedly praised Mr. Schwarzenegger’s handling of the country’s biggest disaster since [Hurricane Katrina](#) two years ago, making veiled comparisons to local relief efforts at that time in Louisiana.

“It makes a big difference when you have someone in the statehouse willing to take the lead,” Mr. Bush said at a news conference, in an apparent dig at the Louisiana governor, Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, a Democrat. He also assured [California](#) residents, “We’re not going to forget you in Washington, D.C.”

With most of the fires no longer posing a significant threat, fire officials were stepping up

efforts to determine how much of the blame for the devastation fell on nature and how much on arsonists.

In Orange County, where the authorities have already determined that a large fire north of Mission Viejo was intentionally set, investigators have begun to interview people about possible suspects. On Thursday they closed canyon roads and searched the rubble for clues.

The fire there, which is still burning, has consumed 20,000 acres and nine houses. On Wednesday, [F.B.I.](#) agents descended on Santiago Canyon Road, near Irvine, to gather evidence, which was sent to a laboratory to be analyzed.

“We desperately want to catch the person or persons that did this,” said Chip Prather, the Orange County fire authority chief at a news conference in Irvine. The evidence at the scene, which he would not discuss further, suggested arson, Mr. Prather said.

A separate fire, to the east in Riverside County, was also found to be intentional. At least two people, in San Bernardino and Los Angeles Counties, have been arrested on suspicion of arson.

The scale and ferocity of the fires almost certainly stemmed from a trajectory familiar to firefighters, fire investigation experts said.

Typically, fires created by human error, lightning or a downed power line create large embers that can fly as far as a mile away with the force of the Santa Ana winds behind them, setting off new blazes. Early indications point to downed power lines as the culprit in a fire in Malibu and possibly two others.

Arsonists begin copying them, investigators said, aided by wind, miles of drought-created tinder and the steep hills that are prevalent throughout the state, which make for far better fire-spreading conditions than flat land.

“It’s not by accident that you get 17 or 18 fires going at the same time,” said Harold Schaitberger, general president of the International Association of Firefighters. “There is no question you then get serial artist copycats out to create the next and larger event.”

The history of wildfires in California has proved the point over and over.

Last year, arson and murder charges were filed against a 36-year-old man in connection with a wildfire that killed five [Forest Service](#) firefighters 90 miles east of Los Angeles. The authorities said they were investigating whether the man arrested in that fire had been involved with scores of other fires in the region over a number of years.

In 2003, arson was behind some of 15 fires that roared across six California counties, killing 22 people. In 1993, four people were killed in roughly 20 fires, half of which were found to stem from arson.

Investigators begin to suspect arson when they discover multiple points of origin in a fire — as was the case in the fire now burning in Orange County, the authorities say — and other physical evidence.

Charles P. Ewing, a forensic psychologist and law professor at the [State University of New York](#) in Buffalo, said the fires were sure to catch the attention of people inclined to arson.

“They are likely the ones following the fires very closely,” Mr. Ewing said. “Then, it’s not uncommon for arsonists to engage in copycat activity or to piggyback on a naturally occurring fire.”

Arson experts said juveniles, who are believed to be behind about half of intentional fires, are often curious about fire but do not intend to cause cataclysmic harm. Adults’ motivations are more complex.

Sometimes, Mr. Ewing said, “arsonists actually derive sexual pleasure from committing the act,” while others are seeking attention and may participate in extinguishing the very fires they light.

Two other features of California — its border with Mexico and the proclivity of its residents to live along remote canyons and hilltops — contribute to the excessive fire danger.

Illegal immigrants who have crossed the border where some of the fiercest fires have raged this week often start campfires that get out of control, Mr. Schaitberger said. And fire travels faster and with more vigor uphill, making those pathways extremely flammable.

Winds, high temperatures and extreme drought contributed to the severity of the current fires. While firefighters had the upper hand on most of them by Thursday, the fire in Orange County, which flared up late Wednesday night, and one burning near Lake Arrowhead were the biggest challenges. In San Diego County, over 800 houses remained threatened.

Elsewhere around Southern California, residents began to regroup, returning to homes that had been spared or taking in the heartbreaking spectacle of what used to be. In Qualcomm Stadium, in San Diego, the main way station for evacuees, officials estimated that fewer than 1,000 people remained.

Sergeant Radovich of the San Diego Sheriff's Department said the bodies of the four Mexican immigrants had been found in a canyon area by a patrol. "It is more than likely they were overwhelmed by the fire," he said.

The bodies were found in an area where people frequently pass after crossing the border illegally, he said. Officials have told firefighters to be on the lookout for bodies because the fire moved with great speed through that area and the terrain is perilous, making escape difficult.

Randal C. Archibold and Will Carless contributed reporting from San Diego, and Ana Facio Contreras from Irvine.

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
