

THE JUNE LIGHTNING SIEGE

By Daniel Berlant, department information officer, Sacramento Headquarters, Communications

As an ominous weather front approached Northern and Central California on June 20, fire officials immediately knew that something was different with this storm. What made this thunderstorm different was the fact that these clouds contained no significant amount of rain and that California was well into a drought across the state. When all was said and done, over 2,000 fires had ignited in 26 counties from over 6,000 lightning strikes. As one of the most severe wildland fire events ever experienced in California's history, these fires destroyed over 500 structures and took the lives of 15.

There was no single factor, but a combination of factors that made the June and July Lightning Siege so unprecedented. The lightning storm could not have come at a worse time. California had seen three years of below normal rainfall that had left the vegetation bone-dry. In fact, spring 2008 was the driest on record in many locations, prompting Governor Schwarzenegger to declare a statewide drought for the first time in over a

decade. "For the areas in Northern California that supply most of our water, this March, April and May have been the driest ever in our recorded history," Governor Schwarzenegger said. Following this declaration Governor Schwarzenegger signed an Executive Order boosting the state's preparedness for wildfires. The Order immediately mobilized critical firefighting resources and personnel.

Just as the number of lightning caused fires was unprecedented for such an early fire siege, so was the response. CAL FIRE joined local and federal firefighting agencies to send over 21,000 firefighters to battle the blazes across the state. Firefighting personnel were brought in from around the nation and even the world. Forty-one of the 50 states responded to California's fire siege from as far away as New York, Florida and Alaska sent resources. Countries like Australia, New Zealand and Greece even offered help and sent fire managers.



The last CAL FIRE lightning siege fire was finally contained on July 29. Over the next few months, the state's fire activity was relatively normal especially in Southern California. In late November, a number of wildfires sparked in Southern California in Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and Orange Counties. These three fires were extremely destructive destroying hundreds of homes and structures. These three fires all started within a few days of each other and each was a high profile incident. Either due to location, destruction or complexity, these three fires received a lot of attention. The Tea Fire in Santa Barbara burned throughout the upscale communities of Montecito and Santa Barbara. The Sayre Fire destroyed hundreds of homes and structures throughout northern Los Angeles County. Finally, the Freeway Complex burned over 30,000 acres across four counties.

Lightning Siege Statistics

2,096 Fires 1.2 million Acres

Statistics at the Peak (7/13/2008)

21,244 Personnel 489 Hand Crews
 1,520 Engines 391 Water Tenders
 231 Dozers 121 Helicopters

