



*The 2008 June Fire
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Although it was only
June, the burning
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Setting the Stage

When storm cells formed over the ocean, moved onshore, and the first lightning struck during the evening of June 20th, the 2008 June Fire Siege began. To understand why the siege occurred, it is necessary to review the weather and fuel conditions that lead up to the first ignition.

Fire season in California is largely determined by California's Mediterranean climate of long, hot, dry summers and is usually busiest from July to October. During years with an atypically dry spring or fall the fire season can be longer. The spring of 2008 was extremely dry.

The year started wet through about mid-February, but there was very little significant precipitation for the rest of the winter and spring. For example, at the Redding airport January accounts for almost half of the year's total precipitation, with below normal precipitation from March through June. Statewide, spring (March, April, May) of 2008 ranked as the driest of the 114 years of record in the California Climate Tracker (Western Region Climate Center – California Climate Tracker). Snow surveys at the end of April 2008 show that water content of the snow pack was far below average in most mountain areas. The third week of May brought a heat wave that started in Northern California and spread to Southern California with 194 record high temperatures set. Dry weather continued in June and foehn winds blew from the 10th through the 12th.

The hot, dry spring caused early curing of lower elevation grasses and large woody fuel moistures were 4-8 weeks ahead of typical early summertime drying. In many places, shrubs put on little or no new growth, and mature shrub growth died back. The increased

ratio of dead-to-live fuel made already flammable brush even more dangerous. Forest fuels also died rapidly. By late June, fuels reached historic levels of dryness in several areas.

Preparedness

Preparation for the fire season in California is an intensive, year-round effort for the professional fire fighting agencies. The hiring, training, education and conditioning of firefighters is emphasized in the winter and spring. Equipment is purchased, updated, maintained and is standing by. Contracts are in place, overhead teams are staffed and organized, and mutual aid agreements and operating plans are finalized. The agencies must be ready when fire season arrives.

Months before the 2008 June Fire Siege started, the firefighting agencies in California recognized that the current combination of weather and fuel conditions had increased the potential for a very severe fire season. Federal fire agencies prepare for severe fire seasons that may occur in one or more regions of the country each year. That year, much of the focus was on California. The State of California increased its level of preparedness due to the potential volatility of the fire season and trend toward more active fire seasons.

On May 9th, 2008, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed Executive Order S-03-08 (see appendix), designed to bolster the state's preparedness for a long, dangerous fire season by increasing the state's firefighting resources and raising public awareness of the early, very dry fire season. The order directed CAL FIRE and other state agencies to take immediate action to prepare and protect the state from wildfire.

While the magnitude of the June lightning storm and resulting fires was not forecast, when it arrived, the firefighting agencies were well prepared for the long, severe fire season.

To prepare for the likelihood of a busy fire season, the fire agencies took several actions:

- ▶ Additional staff was hired and trained
- ▶ Interagency coordination agreements were developed and in place prior to the fire season
 - Interagency dialog was initiated and kept open
 - The northern and southern GACCs conducted a joint activation simulation in May
- ▶ Contracted fire-fighting resources were inspected, trained, and available for deployment
- ▶ Fire fighting resources were readied for quick deployment as conditions worsened
- ▶ Agencies exercised early contract start dates for aircraft.
- ▶ Early efforts were made to boost public awareness
- ▶ Military Resources were coordinated and made available
- ▶ Joint training exercises were conducted

Early Season Fire Activity

In May and June, California experienced major fires exhibiting fire behavior more characteristic of late summer than spring. These fires reflect the influence of drought, build-up of dry fuel, and wind driven rapid rates of spread. The fires described here are early indicators of what is to come.

The Summit Fire began on May 22nd, at 5:17 a.m. near Mayman's Flat in Santa Clara County and quickly spread into Santa Cruz County. North/northwest winds of about 20 mph (with gusts exceeding 50 mph) drove the fire at an extreme rate of spread, and burned nearly 3,500 acres on the first day. The fire was contained on

May 28th, burned 4,270 acres and forced the evacuation of about 1,500 residents. The fire destroyed 42 dwellings, 37 outbuildings, and 42 vehicles. At the height of the firefighting effort, over 3,500 personnel, including 250 engines, 98 hand crews, 54 bulldozers, 18 helicopters, and 7 air tankers were committed to the incident.

The Indians Fire started on June 8th on the Los Padres National Forest, about 20 miles west of King City in the Salinas Valley. By June 20, the fire was only 41% contained, and covered more than 50,000 acres in and around the rugged and inaccessible Ventana Wilderness Area. Firefighting resources committed to this fire operation included 121 fire engines, 71 hand crews, 15 bulldozers, 14 helicopters, 7 air tankers and more than 2,300 fire personnel. The Indians Fire eventually burned 81,378 acres before it was contained on July 10, 2008.

In Butte County on June 10th, the Ophir Fire started east of Highway 70 near Palermo. On June 11th the Humboldt Fire spread rapidly from the outskirts of Chico uphill into the town of Paradise. Combined, the two fires burned approximately 40,000 acres and 303 structures. At the height of the Ophir Fire operations, 96 engines, 21 crews, 11 bulldozers, and 429 personnel were committed. As the Ophir Fire reached containment on June 12th, all excess resources were re-mobilized from the Ophir Fire to the Humboldt Fire. At the height of fire operations on the Humboldt Fire there were 521 fire engines, 68 hand crews, 22 bulldozers, and 3,826 personnel committed to the fire-fight. More than 18,000 residents of the Paradise area lost power, and as many as 10,000 people were evacuated from their homes and businesses.

The Martin Fire was reported the afternoon of June 11th, off of Martin Road in the Santa Cruz County community of Bonny Doon. Unlike the Summit Fire,

which was primarily spread by strong wind, the Martin Fire burned in lighter winds in dry, heavy fuels. March through June rainfall amounts were the lowest ever recorded in this area, at about 8% of average. The weather for May and June was unseasonably hot and dry, with little of the seasonal marine layer intrusion. The Martin Fire burned 520 acres before being contained on June 16th; 90% of that acreage burned the first day. The fire forced the evacuation of approximately 1,200 residents and destroyed 3 dwellings and 8 outbuildings. At the height of fire operations, there were 67 fire engines, 29 hand crews, 11 water tenders, eight air tankers, and 100 other resources assigned, with a total of 2,000 personnel. The Whiskey Fire, located south of the town of Paskenta

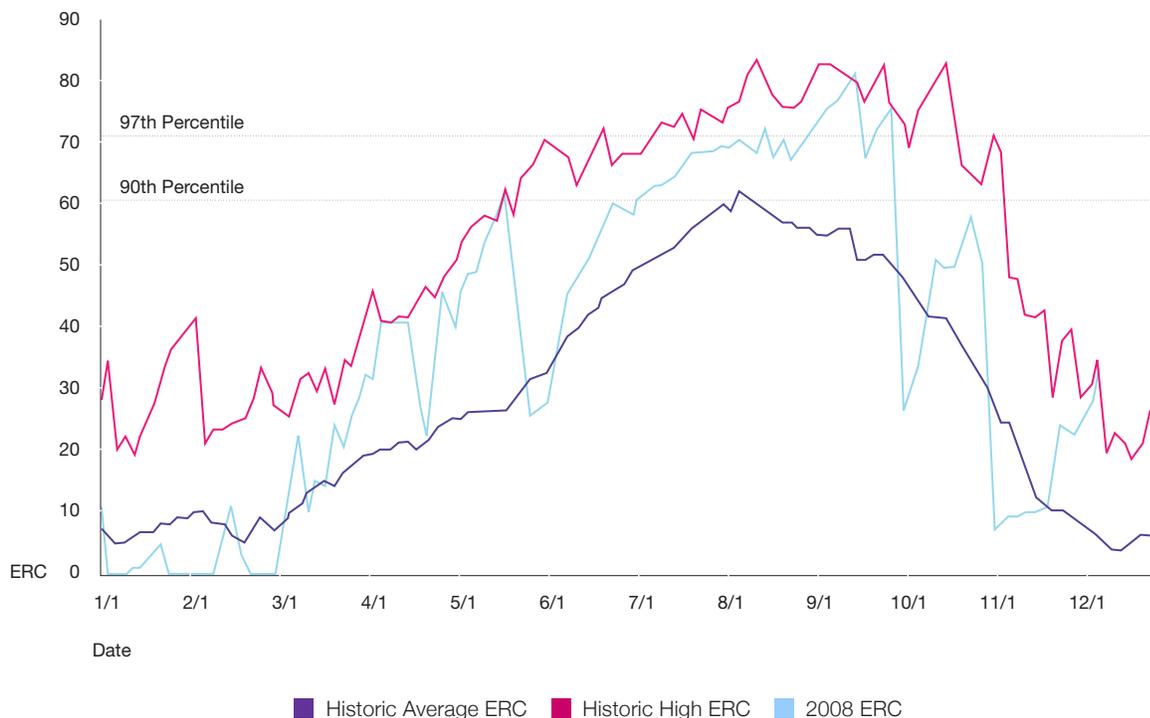
Forest, started on June 12th at 12:30 p.m. The fire threatened Thomes Creek, which is the water supply for Paskenta, private timberland, and high value livestock. A Type 2 Incident management team assumed command and contained the fire on June 19th at 7,783 acres. There were 30 engines, 28 hand crews, 11 dozers and 807 total personnel at the height of the incident.

Governor Schwarzenegger proclaimed a State of Emergency in the following counties: Santa Clara County (5/24/08) due to the Summit Fire, Butte County (6/11/08) due to the Ophir and Humboldt fires, and Santa Cruz County (6/11/08) due to the Whiskey Fire. These four fires combined burn 29,734 acres, destroyed 446 structures and damaged another 446 structures.



Energy Release Components (ERC) for North Zone

By late June, Energy Release Components (ERCs), a measure of how intensely wildland fuels will burn, were ranging from well above normal to record highs for the date.



The term “fire siege” can be defined as multiple fires that burn simultaneously over an extended period of time, over large geographic areas and severely challenge fire suppression resources.

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