

# Preface

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In October of 2003, Southern California experienced the most devastating wildland fire disaster in state history. The facts are staggering—750,043 acres burned, 3,710 homes lost and 24 people killed including one firefighter.

There is nothing we can say here to lessen the impact of the terrible loss of life and property—we can only make an effort to learn all we can from this disaster. It is in that spirit that we established an interagency team, even before the smoke had cleared, to chronicle the Fire Siege of 2003. This report is a result of this team’s effort. Tasked with a very short timeframe, this document provides a synopsis of the key decisions and significant actions that impacted the Siege. We attempt to note the range of factors affecting decision-makers, including the influence of social and political pressures which added to the complexity of the event and influenced strategic decisions. Our goal was to produce a document as quickly and accurately as possible so that it could be put to use immediately in multiple arenas by a diverse group of people. In-depth details of each incident, analysis and recommendations will be left to the many other after-action reports, reviews and investigations that will follow this catastrophe.

We are grateful for the firefighters and citizens whose efforts saved so many lives and communities. Our condolences go out to those who suffered losses. Already we see efforts underway to restore and rebuild. That is what California does.

Wildfire and humanity are intertwined in the West. Similar fire events will happen again. It is our hope that this report can help to mitigate future losses and promote proactive fire planning.

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*On the cover: The satellite photo shown on the cover was taken during the peak of the fire siege. The use of satellite technology as well as other advances has greatly improved the ability of strategic commanders to make real-time decisions. Photo courtesy of NASA.*