

Firefighting shortages played role in California wild fire damage

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As of Sunday, the Santiago Fire in Orange County, having burned more than 11,000 acres, was still raging to the north of the city of Irvine and east of the city of Orange. It is threatening to jump into Riverside County's Cleveland National Forest.

The working class city of Colton is in its path. Some 600 firefighters find themselves battling a fire that has already consumed more than 27,000 acres.

The fire began at approximately 6 pm on October 21. Police authorities suspect the fire was caused by an arsonist, or a group of arsonists, and have offered \$285,000 for any information leading to the arrest of the alleged perpetrators. Arson is suspected because the fire apparently began in three separate places.

According to most sources, the most important factors behind the wild fires that have ravaged southern California are the drought, the hot weather and the Santa Ana winds blowing from the deserts at 85 miles per hour. It has also been acknowledged that one fire was the result of a semi-truck that had overturned and burst into flames.

It is now widely acknowledged in the press, including the *Los Angeles Times*, that California's sixth richest county, Orange County, with a population of over 3 million, had already lost its battle with the Santiago fire the minute it began. Despite tamer Santa Ana winds, more than 3,000 homes remain threatened.

The county lost the battle not primarily because of the ferocity of the fire or human failure in the face of overwhelming odds, but because of the county's own lack of preparation and cutbacks.

According to county sources themselves, its fire engines had been "staffed below national standards."

According to the National Fire Protection Association, four firefighters per engine is the minimum standard considered adequate to fight a fire.

Most of Orange County's engines were staffed with three firefighters.

Afrack Vargas, speaking on behalf of the California State Firefighters' Association, declared recently that "when you lose one person in a crew, you're sacrificing safety. You're sacrificing another set of eyes. You're sacrificing another strong back to help in the incident. It makes a difficult situation that much more difficult."

But according to officials of the county government, this wealthy county, known as a bastion of conservatism and Republicanism and home of tax-cutting Proposition 13, simply can't afford crews of four on each engine.

Three years ago, when fires swept through the region, the firefighters union fought for

a measure to receive a larger share of the revenue from a half-cent sales tax passed by voters in 2003. This would have added tens of millions of dollars to the fire department's budget, but the County Board of Supervisors, heavily pro-business, opposed it.

The annual firefighting budget of \$260 million for a population of approximately 3,100,000 translates into about one firefighter per 1,100 people. But this figure is deceiving, because when only full-time professional and seasoned firefighters are counted, the figure becomes one firefighter per 1,800 inhabitants.

Three hours after the fire—or rather, the three fires that became one—the Fire Authority acknowledged that the lack of resources had "greatly hampered" its effort. The county had sent 15 of its engines to Malibu, more than seventy miles away, to help quench the fire that had started there.

One resident of Santiago Canyon, who did not lose his home but was evacuated, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "People around here know the firemen didn't

have enough help. It's been in the news. I know for sure that this fire could have been prevented.

"We're a rich county. I'm not rich myself. I have a modest home in the hills. I still owe a lot of money on it.

"I saw the fire moving so fast, I thought we were goners. But somehow we managed to leave in time down the hill as help arrived. The fire was getting really big. You could see the flames. I could feel the heat right behind our car. There was ash falling like snow.

"But why? How did this fire start? People are talking around here and nobody believes there were any plans for a calamity like this.

"This despite the fact that we had fires similar to this three or four years ago. Not right here, but certainly near. And what the hell were all these fire engines doing in Malibu? That's in LA County! Now you tell me, why would a rich county like Orange County not have enough help?"

After the fires four years ago, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed a "blue ribbon" commission to make recommendations about fires in the state. One of the commission's recommendations was to buy 150 more fire engines for emergencies.

Four years later, in a state that is the world's sixth largest economy, only 19 of those engines had been ordered. None have been delivered.

Chip Prather, chief of the county's Fire Authority, has publicly stated that with an additional 25 engines he could have kept the fire under control before it jumped Santiago Road and threatened the populations of the cities of Modjeska, Silverado Canyon, Portola and the foothills of Lake Forest. The fire at that time was moving three miles every twenty minutes.

By the time air power was employed to spray fire retardant and other chemical substances, the fire had quadrupled in area. Helicopters and C-130 transports had been kept grounded because of the strong Santa Ana winds.



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