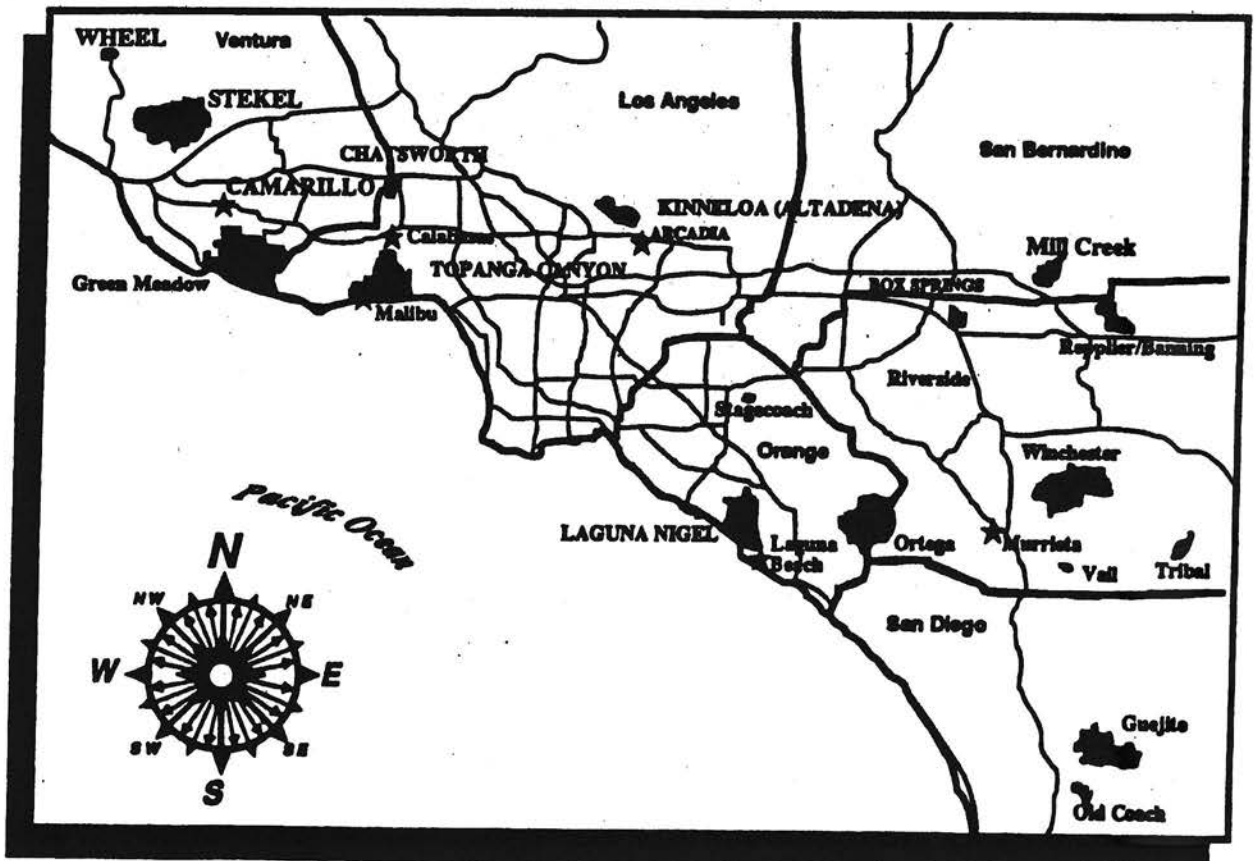




# The Southern California Wildfire Siege

October-November 1993



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## **PREFACE**

### **Purpose**

The Governor's Office of Emergency Services is responsible for producing an "After-Action" report following each declaration of a state of emergency in California.

These reports attempt to identify policies, practices and procedures to improve systems for emergency management in the state. The reports are not intended to provide a narrative or critique of the tactical operations carried out. Evaluations of specific fires are completed by the agencies responsible for managing specific incidents.

This report draws on work by many local, state and federal agencies that were siege, as well as media accounts and other assessments that involved during the 1993 fire were completed at the time of the fires.

This report attempts to assess the effectiveness of the components of local, state, and federal emergency management systems in responding to the events of October/November, 1993; it includes 95 recommendations of actions that would address issues identified in the report.

This after-action report should be read along with the evaluation of the local-state-federal hazard mitigation team, "Hazard Mitigation Survey Team Report For The Southern California Firestorms October 25 - November 10, 1993, FEMA- 1005-DR-CA". The hazard mitigation report identifies actions that can be taken by individual residents, as well as public agencies and insurance companies, to reduce the risk that California faces from future wildland fires.

### **Report Preparation**

This report was developed through the cooperation and contribution of many public and private sector agencies. Their contributions are gratefully acknowledged. The report has been prepared by the Terence Haney Consulting Group under OES Contract 6131-3. Much of the material contained within Section 6 of the report on the Fire and Rescue Mutual Aid System response was provided by the OES Fire and Rescue Branch.

While the conclusions and recommendations hopefully reflect those of all of the contributors, they are expressed as heard and seen by those responsible for preparing the the findings in report. We regret if there are any discrepancies or omissions. We hope this report will contribute to improvements in emergency response for California.

# GOVERNORS OFFICE OF EMERGENCY SERVICES

## WILDLAND FIRES AFTER ACTION REPORT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### **BACKGROUND**

Beginning on October 26, 1993, southern California experienced one of the worst wildfire sieges in its history. When the fires finally ended on November 5, 1993, there were four fatalities, over 1,200 structures had been destroyed, nearly 200,000 acres had been swept by 22 different fires -- and the response cost/damage estimate approached \$1 billion.

The events prompted Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego counties to declare local emergencies. Governor Wilson declared a State of Emergency on October 27, 1993, and requested a Presidential Declaration, which was made on October 28, 1993, thereby providing federal assistance and funding.

The California Fire and Rescue Mutual Aid System brought together more resources than had ever been used in its 44-year history, including 15,000 personnel from the fire services and 1,525 fire engines. The current reimbursement costs for mutual aid providers exceed \$12 million.

#### **SCOPE OF THE REPORT**

This After-Action Report has been prepared on the 1993 wildfires by the Governor's Office of Emergency Services. The report was prepared over several months through a series of field surveys, interviews and a workshop involving the principal staffs from several of the larger fire incidents. This report also includes documents from several state and local agencies, material from media reports, and input from public hearings.

The report is divided into major sections dealing with: (1) the field response- incident level; (2) local government; (3) regional response; (4) state response; (5) the fire and rescue mutual aid system; (6) communications; and (7) the role of assisting agencies and cooperating agencies.

More than 95 recommendations for improving future responses to major incidents can be found within the report. The recommendations fall into seven broad categories:

1. More Rapid Response - Place more emphasis on developing the capability to provide a more rapid response within the mutual aid system. This includes improved procedures for activating mutual aid resources, providing better in transit tracking and support, providing off-incident Mobilization Centers, and developing a better-overall information base for managing the mutual aid response. Nine areas for improvement to the overall mutual aid system are discussed, including resource tracking processes, communications, use of mobilization centers, reimbursement and demobilization. Providing qualified personnel to facilitate the coordination process is a high priority.
2. Increased Training - Provide increased training in all aspects and levels of Incident Command System (ICS). The opportunities for use of ICS on large incidents are relatively few. Personnel experienced in the use of ICS on major incidents tend to be promoted or retire, leaving a void in personnel with qualifications and experience. Nearly every response to surveys and interviews cited the need for training. The use of ICS advisors on major incidents should be considered.
3. Use of Unified Command - Encourage the use of the Unified Command process within ICS. Unified Command allows all agencies with geographic or functional responsibility to work together within a common Incident Action Plan. The Unified Command component of ICS is a valuable tool. For it to be used effectively, however, there must be full understanding of how it works and to whom it applies. Several responders acknowledged that it should have been used, but was not due to a lack of training and familiarity. Unified Command is not limited to just the fire services. It should be used whenever there is shared jurisdictional responsibility.
4. Improved Communications - The lack of effective communications on incidents, as well as between the incidents and department operating centers, continues to be a major problem. While communications technology has seen great improvements over the years, many of these improvements are not yet within the inventories of the responding agencies. New radio systems, cellular telephones, and satellites all provide greater capabilities -- but also greater challenges and, in some cases, limitations. Many responders cited the need for better use of information processing technology both on and off the incidents. A range of recommendations is offered to improve communications and information systems effectiveness.
5. Aircraft - The use of aircraft in support of operations during these incidents continues to pose special challenges. Recommendations are offered regarding the need to improve procedures for activating military air support, examining, the use of heavy lift helicopters, and working more closely with the media to

avoid possible safety and air space violations. One of the issues regarding aircraft is the widespread misunderstanding of when and how they can most effectively be used during fire suppression.

6. Multi-Agency Coordination - More emphasis needs to be placed on improving the effectiveness of multi-agency coordination. The process and procedures currently in place, while largely effective, need to be examined and in some cases improved. More effective coordination is needed between the Fire and Rescue Mutual Aid System and Emergency Operations Centers at all levels. Training in the use of multi-agency coordination is especially important, as is ensuring that qualified personnel are available to operate multi-agency coordination systems.
7. Assisting Agencies - Agencies that provide major support to incidents, such as law enforcement, people care agencies, public works, and utilities all expressed the strong need for more cooperation, coordination, direct involvement on incidents, and training opportunities with the fire services. In cases where law enforcement agencies have extensive geographic or functional jurisdiction, they should be made a part of incident Unified Command organizations.

### **STANDARDIZED EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (SEMS)**

The California Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) requires that the principles and primary functions of the Incident- Command System, the Mutual Aid System, and multi-agency or inter-agency coordination be used by all emergency response agencies in multiagency or multi-jurisdictional incidents. Many of the recommendations and lessons learned during the wildland fires of 1993 will be used in the development of the SEMS guidelines and training curriculum. SEMS is undergoing development with a full implementation date of December 1996.

The implementation of SEMS provides the vehicle and the opportunity for major improvements to emergency management within all agencies. SEMS will integrate systems, improve training and make the good systems already in place work even more effectively in the future.