

Residents return to Catalina Island as firefighters gain ground

by Gordon Smith, Dan Laidman

AVALON - With the weather cooperating, hundreds of firefighters who were rushed to Santa Catalina Island aboard boats, helicopters and military hovercraft gained ground Friday against a raging wildfire, as residents began returning to their homes and lives on a resort island that many described as idyllic but vulnerable due to its remoteness.

Ten water-dropping helicopters and five fixed-wing air tankers helped drive the fire away from Avalon, the island's largest city, which was threatened by towering flames Thursday night. Only one home and six commercial buildings were destroyed.

"The good thing is it was just our house - nobody else's house burned," Brad Wilson, who watched flames consume his home Thursday night, calmly told news reporters.

By Friday evening, some 740 firefighters, most on the ground, positioned themselves to keep the 4,200-acre fire from threatening populated areas again as the wind shifted. As of 4 p.m., the blaze was 35 percent contained but continued to burn in Catalina's rugged interior hills and ravines.

Fire officials said they expect full containment Tuesday. They believe the blaze was caused by a contractor working on a radio-station antenna about five miles from Avalon.

"We're not going to let our guard down," said Capt. Andrew Olvera of the Los Angeles County Fire Department. As he spoke, plumes of white smoke continued to rise over Avalon's picturesque harbor, and ash periodically rained down on buildings, people and bobbing yachts.

About 2,500 residents and visitors were evacuated by boat from the island Thursday as flames swept toward Avalon, according to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. Many others took refuge in hotels along Avalon's waterfront.

By 4 p.m. Friday, the voluntary evacuation order was lifted, however, and some residents had already begun to return. A woman in a bathing suit lay on the beach. And this eerily quiet city of 3,200 - which swells to 10,000 on weekends and during the summer - was stirring again.

The fire underlined the vulnerability of Catalina, whose entire fire-fighting fleet consists of only four fire engines and four smaller fire vehicles that are divided between the Los Angeles County Fire Department and

the Avalon Fire Department.

County officials on the mainland quickly mobilized helicopters and lifeguard boats to ferry firefighters to the island after the fire broke out at 12:32 p.m. Thursday. Nevertheless, the island's engine companies and volunteers initially faced the blaze on their own and were nearly overrun by fast-moving flames, said Avalon Mayor Robert Kennedy, a volunteer firefighter.

By Thursday evening, authorities also were sending fire engines and equipment to the island aboard five U.S. Navy hovercraft stationed at Camp Pendleton. The high-tech vessels made more than a dozen back-and-forth journeys throughout the night.

"The value (of the hovercrafts) is so great," Olvera said. "Before, we'd bring the equipment over on barges."

The hovercraft - also known as LCACs, for Landing Craft, Air Cushioned - sped to the island at up to 45 miles per hour, spray flying. With a load capacity of more than 60 tons, many were carrying four fire engines when they glided ashore on the island's beaches.

"It's the only way possible we can get the engines over there, which are performing the structure protection," said Los Angeles County Fire Inspector Sam Padilla. "That's a big key."

Meanwhile, four catamarans operated by Catalina Express worked continuously until midnight Thursday, ferrying other fire and emergency personnel to the island and picking up fleeing residents. Many of the latter spent the night at a temporary shelter in Long Beach.

Some residents who fled the island likened it to a war zone, with the sky glowing orange, ashes falling like a heavy snow and helicopters scudding across the sky. Hundreds of people - some of them covering their mouths with bandanas and clothing - waited for ferries to the mainland.

"We were panicked," said Carlos Martinez, 14, who on Friday was at an American Red Cross shelter in Long Beach with his family. "We didn't know if our house was going to burn. They told us to evacuate and I felt, 'Oh, I'm going to die.'"

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Palm Springs residents Pat Damiano and Al Turcheck, siblings who were visiting Catalina for the first time, stuck it out overnight in an island hotel.

"Last night was the most horrible thing I've ever seen," Damiano said. "It got to the point where you really did wonder if they would be able to stop it or if it would destroy the whole town," Turcheck added.

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Thirty-one-year-old Veronica Hernandez said she waited for more than two hours before her family could board a boat for the mainland - watching all the time as smoke filled the air and ash fell from the sky.

Waiting for a ferry ride always seems long, she acknowledged. "But when you see the fire and the smoke and ash, it seems three times as long."

Along with her husband and two daughters, she was ordered out of her home and wound up staying at a shelter in Long Beach.

Hernandez and some other residents conceded that the fire reminded them how vulnerable their 21-mile-long island paradise is. They said it seemed that officials did not expect the fire to grow as quickly as it did, and that more emergency equipment is needed on the island.

"They were not prepared ... but it wasn't really their fault. We needed help and it takes a while getting over to us," said Jane Lopez, a 15-year Avalon resident who left her apartment with only the clothes on her back, her medications and her purse.

Others thought the response was good, but agreed that more equipment was needed.

"They were very quick to get to the fire and very quick to call in volunteers, but the overall consensus is that there has to be a way to store some of this equipment someplace on the interior of the island," said Kari Grandstaff, 32, a math and physical education instructor in Avalon. "We have to have it there faster in case something like this happens again."

Sheriff's officials said tourists would not be allowed on the island until Monday. A source at the Avalon Chamber of Commerce estimated that island entrepreneurs had already lost \$500,000 in tourism revenue because of the fire - a figure that will undoubtedly rise over the weekend.

Still, Jim Watson, a 12-year resident who works as a projectionist at the Avalon Theater and writes for the Catalina Islander newspaper, said that he expects life to return to normal for residents fairly quickly. As he chatted with neighbors on the street and shot video images of the flames and smoke in the hills, he echoed the sentiments about the rugged Catalina lifestyle.

"Catalina Islanders are pretty much resilient as far as these things go - it's the whole island self-sufficiency thing," he said. "Now, if the whole town got hit ... that could be a big deal."

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