

Feds gear up to assist SoCal firefighters

by UPI

WASHINGTON -- U.S. President George Bush Tuesday dispatched Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to California as the federal government rushed aid to firefighters. Bush declared a state of emergency in the region where wind-driven wildfires have scorched thousands of acres and routed nearly a half-million people from their homes in the Los Angeles and San Diego areas. Chertoff's spokesman, Russ Knocke, said the secretary would meet with local officials and monitor Washington's growing response to the disaster. Chertoff told reporters in Washington that federal assets had been loading into the state since the weekend, including shelter supplies and firefighting aircraft that will join the fray when the winds allow for safe flying. "We haven't waited for paperwork to be signed but we have been moving cots, blankets, other supplies into the San Diego area so that we can handle any need for additional sheltering capacity," he said. The Federal Emergency Management Agency said Tuesday it was staffing an interagency emergency management center on a round-the-clock basis and was establishing staging areas for arriving personnel and equipment.

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