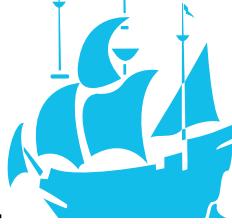


SANTA MARIA TIMES



A feast for hundreds

Central Coast Rescue Missions serves Christmas dinner CENTRAL COAST, A3



Balderas to box live

Santa Maria brothers set to fight Saturday night SPORTS, B1



PARTLY SUNNY 69 • 52 FORECAST, B8 | **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2019** | santamariatimes.com

WILDFIRE COUNTY | PREPARING FOR THE NEXT BIG BLAZE



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY SANTA BARBARA COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT ENGINEER MIKE CZULEGER

Flames rage at Camp Whittier minutes after the Whittier fire began July 8, 2017. Nine Santa Barbara County sheriff's deputies were honored 11 for their life-saving efforts as the flames threatened youths and counselors at nearby camps, which were heavily damaged.

Whittier fire struck hard at Santa Ynez camps

But in addition to hours of fear, devastating loss, fire brought tales of heroism, cooperation

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On Saturday, July 8, 2017, Santa Barbara County sat baking under a blazing sun in a cloudless blue sky as temperatures pushed into the 90s in the Santa Ynez Valley.

At the nearby Cachuma Lake Recreation Area, campers relaxed in the shade while their children splashed in the swimming pool, unaware that across Highway 154 behind low ridges covered with oaks, a juvenile was driving a passenger car through dry grass on a hillside above Camp Whittier.

At 1:40 p.m., heat from the catalytic converter or perhaps a spark from the vehicle's exhaust ignited the dry grass on U.S. Bureau of Reclamation land, and the Whittier fire ignited.

Flames raced along Highway 154, sending panicked campers fleeing from Cachuma Lake, leaving their tents and other gear behind.

"When we saw it, it was just



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Campers climb into a Santa Barbara County Search and Rescue van for evacuation from Circle V Ranch Camp as smoke drifts in the air during the early hours of the Whittier fire on Saturday, July 8, 2017.

across the road," said Edwin Figueroa of San Diego. "Our campsite was right alongside the highway. I thought, 'This is pretty close.' You could hear the crackling of the fire."

The flames and the smoke cast an eerie light over everything.

"When we were young, we had

an experience with a fire in our neighborhood that changed the color of the atmosphere," said Dennis Alcazar of Los Angeles, whose family was camping with the Figueroa family. "I knew this was not good."

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WILDFIRE COUNTY

About this series

Over the course of four days, we look back at tales of evacuation, Tepusquet residents who watched the Alamo fire blacken their canyon home as they fled down narrow access roads; Mission Hills residents who escaped following orders delivered by a first responder with a bullhorn; and campers who, trapped by a wall of flame, were saved by a firefighter leading a convoy on a bulldozer.

We also look forward at how conditions are changing, agencies are preparing and, ultimately, how we can apply lessons learned from those who have witnessed – and survived – a big blaze.

Coming Sunday:
Lessons learned

Agencies prestage, upgrade to prepare for fires

County embarks on major vegetation reduction program

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When a structure fire broke out July 6, 2018, on North Fairview Avenue in the hills at the edge of Goleta, the flames, later dubbed the Holiday fire, spread explosively through the neighborhood.

Driven by hot Santa Lucia winds rushing down the Santa Ynez Mountains, the fire began gobbling up other homes as panicked residents fled and traffic on the narrow residential roads became chaotic.

When it was finally fully contained five days later, however, the fire had been held to just 113 acres.

Only 10 homes and 14 out-buildings were destroyed, while three homes sustained damage.

Given the fast downslope winds, low humidity and high temperatures that night plus the relatively dense clusters of homes, it could have been much



MIKE ELIASON, SANTA BARBARA COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT

Santa Barbara County Fire Department's wildland firefighters Crew 1-1 and Crew 1-2 work to clear a fire line while training near their camp at Cachuma Lake. The firefighters work together to build a corridor cleared of vegetation down to the mineral soil as a fuel break and to help contain a vegetation fire.

worse.

But anticipating the weather conditions, Santa Barbara County Fire Department had staged additional resources not far away on Cathedral Oaks Road, and at the first alarm, they began pouring into the neighborhood.

Prestaging engines and crews

in or near high-risk areas is a short-term tactic based on weather forecasts and other factors – like an influx of visitors for a Fourth of July holiday. But agencies also prepare for potential wildfires on a seasonal basis.

Although "fire season" is now

considered year-round in Santa

Barbara County and throughout most of California, the danger level increases when a mild spring warms into a hot summer and then bakes into a blazing fall.

"Our engines, hand crews, hotshots and bulldozers are here year-round," said Jim Harris, fire chief for Los Padres National Forest. "But seasonally, they're boosted."

Like the U.S. Forest Service, the County Fire Department also increases staffing and the number of engines, bulldozers and other resources it has available as that annual heating and drying cycle begins.

Using a long-term tactic, both the Forest Service and County Fire prepare for wildfires by modifying fuel conditions to keep flames from spreading out of control.

"There are three elements to wildfire – fuel, topography and weather," Santa Barbara County Fire Marshal Rob Hazard explained. "We can't control the weather. We can't change the topography. But we can modify the fuels."

Please see PREPARATION, Page A10

Trial for MS-13 defendants to be split

Judge rules divided seating would deprive defendants of rights

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A Superior Court judge on Friday ruled the 10 defendants in the MS-13 case must be tried in two separate groups, finding that a lack of space to seat them together inside the Santa Maria courtroom could deprive them of their constitutional rights.

The defendants are among 12 who were each indicted in July 2016 on dozens of gang-related and murder charges stemming from arrests made in law enforcement's Operation Matador in March of that year.

All are accused members of the transnational criminal organization MS-13 and investigators said they are linked to at least 10 unsolved homicides in the Santa Maria Valley over a three-year period.

One defendant in the indictment, Ezequiel Escalante-Rivera, was sentenced to 20 years in state prison in October.

Another, Jose Emedalio Bonilla-Mejia, awaits sentencing in a separate federal racketeering and murder case in the Southern District of Ohio.

Judge John McGregor made the ruling after it was determined Santa Barbara County Superior

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California still most populous, but stalls at 39.9 million

ADAM BEAM
Associated Press

SACRAMENTO — California's population has stalled at 39.9 million people as expensive housing prices and other factors convince more people to leave the state for other parts of the country.

An estimate released Friday showed California added 141,300 people from July 1, 2018, to July 1, 2019, bringing its total population to 39.96 million on July 1.

Adding births and subtracting deaths, California added more than 180,000 people for the 12 months ending July 1. But more people left the state, resulting in a net migration loss of 39,500 people.

"More people moved out of California than into California this year. That was negative for the first time since 2010," said Eddie Hunsinger, a demographer with the California Department of Finance.

The migration loss has been a boon to other states, particularly Nevada. Last month, Nevada passed the 3 million population mark as the U.S. Census Bureau ranked it as the fastest-growing state in 2018 — mostly because of a steady stream of Californians moving in.

Robert Lang, executive director of Brookings Mountain West at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, said there are more adults in Nevada that were born in California than there are native Nevadans.

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