Forest Fires: California in Flames

By Andrew Gumbel
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Tim Pershing and Franceska Shifrin weren't thinking too much about fire prevention and evacuation when they invited friends to their mountain home in Topanga Canyon, half-way between Los Angeles and Malibu. They were thinking about carving pumpkins for Halloween and making soup.


Lake Arrowhead, California.

Even as reality crept up on them—the smoke and ash pouring out toward the Pacific Ocean, the fire warnings on the radio and the Internet, and the police checkpoints at both ends of Topanga Canyon Boulevard turning away nonresidents—they decided to keep the party going.

Then a police car started circulating with a bullhorn, advising residents to pack up and vacate the area. It wasn't a mandatory evacuation order, just a voluntary one. Slowly, the party guests began to disperse, but the hosts remained remarkably cool. In this part of the world, fire is just part of life; the risk of conflagration is the price to be paid for living in a little piece of paradise.

Pershing and Shifrin never did leave. A local fire captain said they had nothing to worry about that first night, and by sheer luck, the wind changed direction soon enough to spare the entire canyon, including the home of Tim and Franceska.

Not so lucky was Katherine Johnson, who lives in the beachside community of Venice but who recently purchased a house near Lake Arrowhead in the San Bernardino Mountains, two hours' drive east of Los Angeles.

When the fires first hit the Lake Arrowhead area early last week, Johnson was in New York and was unable to do anything to protect her house other than to call a friend and beg him to retrieve as much as he could. As of yesterday, with the so-called Slide fire still burning, she didn't know for sure if she still had a house, but the signs were not good. Her street in Running Springs was listed as one of the most severely damaged. Some 300 houses in the area were reduced to smoldering wrecks—the densest incidence of fire damage anywhere in southern California.

Forest Fires: California in Flames (cont.)

It was the second time in 4 years that Running Springs had taken a big hit—it had been one of the worst-afflicted areas the last time fires fanned by the desert Santa Ana winds broke out in southern California in October. And the reasons aren't hard to fathom. In 2003, the region had endured a dry year. As a result then, and as now, the forests were loaded with combustible materials—brush and fallen bark and leaves on the ground; the trees themselves; and, of course, wooden decks and roofs much like Johnson's.

Much of the Californian media coverage of the fires has focused on finding a culprit for the disaster, which will probably end up destroying around 1,800 homes, ravaging 700 square miles, and costing way more than $1 billion.

A fire chief in suburban Orange County, which is south of Los Angeles, has publicly blamed California's governor for failing to provide enough firefighting resources. Other civic leaders have blamed the fires on arsonists—who were indeed responsible for sparking many of the 18 major fires—and offered rewards of up to $250,000 for information leading to their capture. Still others blame global warming.

What they are all overlooking is that fire is part of the natural cycle in southern California and that human development has exacerbated its severity. "Drought, flood, fire and earthquake—those are the four seasons in California," said Bill Patzert, a climatologist with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in the LA suburb of Pasadena. "Here we have 40 million people living in a semi-arid environment, when rainfall in southern California was between three and five inches. Everybody should have seen this coming 18 months ago."

In a region starved of rainwater, the fires were inevitable. The winds knocked down two power lines in Malibu, which started the fires on Sunday. A variety of other instigators—arsonists, construction workers wielding a welding torch, and others—touched off the fires elsewhere in LA County and in the northeastern suburbs of San Diego, which was the worst of them.

But as long as the winds were howling and embers were flying uncontrollably into suburban neighborhoods, there was nothing firefighters could do other than stay ahead of the flames and warn people to get out.