



The Desert Sun

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WEDNESDAY
October 24, 2007

Fires unstoppable for now; exodus grows to epic level

- More than a half-million people flee in largest evacuation in state history
- More than 1,800 homes and buildings destroyed across Southern California
- President Bush declares a federal emergency for seven hard-hit counties



A firefighter battles a wildfire in the hills below Running Springs on Tuesday as the Santa Ana wind drives wildfire charges toward the town in the San Bernardino mountains. KEVORK DJANSEZIAN, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BY GILLIAN FLACCUS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
SAN DIEGO — Faced with unrelenting winds whipping wildfires into a frenzy across Southern California, firefighters conceded defeat on many fronts Tuesday to an unstoppable force that has chased more than 500,000 people away.

Unless the shrieking Santa Ana winds subside, and that's not expected for at least another day, fire crews say they can do little more than try to wait it out and react — tamping out spot fires and chasing ribbons of airborne embers to keep new fires from flaring.

"If it's this big and blowing with as much wind as it's got, it'll go all the way to the ocean before it stops," said San Diego Fire Capt. Kirk Humphries. "We can save some stuff but we can't stop it."

Tentacles of unpredictable, shifting flame have burned across nearly 600 square miles, killing one person, destroying more than

1,800 homes and prompting the biggest evacuation in California history, from north of Los Angeles, through San Diego to the Mexican border.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said the flames were threatening 68,000 more homes.

"We have had an unfortunate situation that we've had three things come together: very dry areas, very hot weather and then a lot of wind," Schwarzenegger said. "And so this makes the perfect storm for a fire."

In Rancho Santa Fe, a suburb north of San Diego, houses burned just yards from where fire crews fought to contain flames engulfing other properties. In the mountain community of Lake Arrowhead, cabins and vacation homes went up in flames with no fire crews in sight.

"These winds are so strong, we're not trying to fight this fire," said firefighter Jim Gelrud, an engineer from Vista, Calif. "We're just trying to save the buildings."

More than a dozen wildfires blowing across Southern California since Sunday have also injured more than 45 people, including 21 fire-

Please see **WILDFIRE, A5**

Evacuees find safety in valley

Hotels offer special rates, waive pet fees for those fleeing the fires

BY MARIEGAR MENDOZA, COLIN ATAGI AND BRUCE FESSIER
THE DESERT SUN

Hundreds of evacuees from Southern California's devastating wildfires that have scorched nearly 600 square miles — an area twice the size of the Coachella Valley — continued to flock to desert cities on Tuesday.

Many valley hotels, which offered special rates and waived pet fees, expected to be booked Tuesday night.

"Our heart goes out to them, and this is a

way we can help," said Michelle Ianni, marketing director at the J.W. Marriott Desert Springs Resort and Spa in Palm Desert.

The valley also welcomed evacuating animals from Wildhaven Ranch in the San Bernardino Mountain community of Big Bear.

The Living Desert in Palm Desert planned to house mountain lions and bald eagles, among other wild animals.

Byron Williams and his family were among those evacuees who ended up in the Coachella Valley.

The family flew south from Vancouver, British Columbia, to spend a few days at Dis-

Please see **EVACUEES, A4**



Housing experts tell 'tale of two markets'

Trade of high-end homes healthy; challenge lies in entry-level residences

BY KEITH MATHEWY
THE DESERT SUN

If you're selling your Coachella Valley home, be willing to budge from your price.

If you're looking to buy, now's the time to negotiate in a flush market.

And if you're an investor or homeowner banking on equity in your property, be bullish about the future.

Those were three lessons shared Tuesday at the eighth annual State of Real Estate in the Coachella Valley presentation.

"The good news is the fundamentals in this market are solid," said Fred Bell, executive director of the Desert Building Industry Association.

"With the group of baby boomers that are retiring in the next 10 to 15 years, we are going to continue to see a migration into this market."

Overall, our economy is good and our employment levels are

strong, experts said.

But challenges remain. For example, the number of homes sold July-September is down almost 25 percent from last year, and 53 percent fewer from two years ago.

But average prices continue to rise — up 9.1 percent from 2006, up 11 percent from two years ago.

"We have a tale of two markets," said Patrick Veling, president of Real Data Strategies Inc.

"Markets above the median

price continue to do very well. They are holding up on prices, and in many cases we've got tremendous appreciation in ... Rancho Mirage and La Quinta.

"In your entry-level markets we've got some real challenges. And that's due entirely to the inability of first-time buyers to be able to afford to get into the marketplace."

He added, "This correction is entirely about the value of real estate. The economy and job market remain robust."

■ **Full report on E1**

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Plenty of sun

93° 64°

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Tasty tidbits

Local bakers celebrate the joys of the dainty cupcake. Find out where you can get a little taste of heaven in the valley. **D1**

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