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Officials cite improvement since 2003 blazes

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Reverse 911 notification, better cooperation touted

By Matthew T. Hall and Craig Gustafson
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

October 24, 2007

Fire and rescue officials – and the politicians who direct funding and resources their way – say they learned their lesson after wildfires ravaged San Diego County in 2003.

As they battle today's massive fires, they say the difference between then and now is advanced technology, new equipment and better cooperation among the county's various independent-minded jurisdictions.

The question is: Have they done enough?

The 2003 wildfires showcased numerous shortcomings, and led to changes in building codes, new radio and helicopter purchases, and the installation of a Reverse 911 emergency notification system for both the city and county of San Diego.

While the phone system mistakenly evacuated some Rancho San Diego residents and service disruptions made it inoperable in Julian yesterday, the technology is being highly touted from San Diego to Sacramento.

One major pursuit – the consolidation of a few dozen firefighting agencies within the unincorporated county – still is viewed with skepticism. It is progressing slowly with limited buy-in despite decades of study.

Seven agencies are involved in the early stages after initial plans envisioned the participation of 17 of the county's 28 fire districts.

That effort could expand in the wake of this week's devastation, but fire officials also suggested that interagency coordination and

Fire technology facts

- The city and county's Reverse 911 systems combined through yesterday to send out more than 300,000 messages to homes that authorities wanted evacuated on either a mandatory or voluntary basis.
- The county implemented its system in August 2005, and the city implemented it this year. The system can send a 30-second message to land lines.
- The county also recently bought an updated system – dubbed Alert San

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cooperation can be more important than a regional unified command, especially in disasters where firefighters statewide and from Western states respond.

Former San Diego Fire Chief Jeff Bowman said he is following fire developments and news conferences on TV from his Escondido home.

“They claim they have better interoperability now,” Bowman said. “I hope they do.”

Bowman's only criticism is a big one. It surfaced Monday when San Diego fire officials said in a news briefing that only one truck remained in the city. All the other rigs were with firefighters battling the wildfires.

“How can you say that things have improved?” Bowman said. “What if you had a structure fire downtown? How do you put that out?”

Fire experts said every available resource may not have made a difference in the early part of these fires because of the high heat, wind and combustibility of so much dry vegetation.

“If you have an additional fire engine standing in front of a house, then that house has a good chance of surviving,” said former Rancho Santa Fe Fire Chief Erwin Willis. “But when you have thousands of structures that are threatened, you're not going to have thousands of fire engines in front of them no matter what. There isn't enough money for that.”

No one knows more about tight finances than San Diego city officials after five years of fallout from lean budgets and accounting problems that block the city from borrowing money on the public bond market.

Bowman left the department 18 months ago, frustrated that it was hundreds of firefighters and 22 fire stations short of what it should have, given the city's size.

He said it would cost at least \$100 million to build and equip the new stations, and \$40 million a year to staff them. In his last days with the department, he said the department was “under-everything.”

Financial problems forced the city to shelve major fire department construction plans. Notably, the city has opened only one station in recent years, a temporary site in Mission Valley near Qualcomm Stadium.

In addition, it has been a struggle to find money for brush-management and code compliance officers whose job it is to keep city homes safe from fire before it breaks out.

“Without funding, you can't hire people,” Willis said.

Many say the painful lessons of 2003 have improved the overall response by emergency officials and led to better coordination.

State Sen. Denise Ducheny, D-San Diego, said state and local government agencies can communicate because their radios are now compatible.

“It seems to me, at least, there wasn't as much as frustration and lack of coordination as there was four years ago,” Ducheny said. “I think we did

Diego – that allows officials to also contact cell phones, and send e-mail and text messages to distribute warnings.

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learn some lessons.

The region is also much better equipped to contact hundreds of thousands of residents at a moment's notice. Officials have been quick to evacuate whole cities and neighborhoods since Sunday, when the Witch Creek and Harris fires began, as part of a coordinated plan to keep people out of harm's way.

Since 2003, the county and city each purchased a Reverse 911 system – which can send 30-second phone messages to land phone lines. The county launched the system in August 2005 while the city adopted it last month.

In addition, the county recently bought an updated system – dubbed Alert San Diego – that allows officials to contact home phones and cell phones, and send e-mail and text messages. The Internet-based system can make as many as 400,000 calls an hour.

The two systems have combined through yesterday to send out more than 300,000 messages for mandatory and advisory evacuations.

The city also owns one helicopter and the county owns two, all of which have been used in the past few days to dump water on fires. In 2003, local officials had to rely on the state for air support, which could be slow in coming if fires flared in other areas.

As of yesterday afternoon, the county had 25 emergency shelters – six were full – with two available if needed. A countywide evacuation plan approved in April says there are 670 possible shelter locations, from high schools to libraries to shopping centers.

“As you can probably appreciate . . . this is a challenging task,” said Ron Lane, director of the county's Office of Emergency Services.

Copley News Service correspondent James P. Sweeney and staff writers Tony Manolatos and Ed Mendel contributed to this report.

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By zarathustra on 10/24/2007 at 8:37 a.m.

Here's the story to this fire! The next time Sanders is trying to pull a photo op with babies at Qualcomm, they need to ask "Why isn't our fire dept. accredited?"

Our Fire Chief quits because we are so low on resources he can't do his job in good conscience and the city does absolutely nothing. Sanders & Tom Storey spend all their time trying to get Sunroad finished instead. We need to vote every single one of these rats out of office.

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By Watcher on 10/24/2007 at 10:04 a.m.

One thing that hasn't changed since 2003, our county supervisors and the Chula Vista city council continue to approve new sprawl housing subdivisions in the hottest, driest areas of the county that we know will burn again in just a few years. The people who bought those homes and then watched them burn should consider suing the negligent politicians who upzoned the properties to score points with their big developer campaign contributors.

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By mazer1310 on 10/24/2007 at 11:12 a.m.

The primary shortcoming that I saw was in terms of communications. For the first 24 hours of the fire (between Sunday afternoon and Monday afternoon), the availability of accurate information, both online and through news networks was inadequate. The sdcountyemergency website was inoperable due to lack of bandwidth, and even for those of us that managed to get the website to respond, the maps and information of the fires and evacuation zones were often 8-16 hours out of date.

The reverse 911 system was very effective and the evacuations were for the most part well organized, although providing better traffic management could have smoothed the egress from Ramona and Scripps Ranch. (for instance, providing traffic control officers at key intersections and 'orange coning' the opposite direction lanes so that extra lanes could be available on the 4-lane roads for exit.)

By Tuesday, the information flow had dramatically improved with better maps of evacuated areas and fire extents and online news blogs making use of blogspot and google's bandwidth and mapping technologies and message forums set up for individual communities. It would be helpful to have the county's emergency coordinator look into making this a regular part of any emergency response.

Overall, I give the emergency response a B+. For the most part a solid, well organized response. Far better than 2003, but with some areas that could still use improvement.

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By chargerfan4ever on 10/24/2007 at 11:26 a.m.

I thought that after the 2003 fires, a lot of brush had been cleared that was near homes that backed into canyons and other undeveloped land, with ice plant taking its place. So much for the ice plant.

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By Rezqewr on 10/24/2007 at 11:31 a.m.

On Sun.morning, I saw a brand-new housing tract being built into a brush-covered hillside @ E. Valley parkway, and Washington st. When will these

'developers' EVER learn???
Maybe some of them lost their homes in Rancho Santa Fe?

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By Pimp My President on 10/24/2007 at 2:25 p.m.

You geniuses are amazing...so much uninformed/misguided/ignorant/just-plain-stupid comments on these posts.

There is a market demand for housing. Developers respond to market demand. Who built your home? Who built your school? Who built your place of employment? Who built the stores where you buy your necessities? Duh, a developer. And where do you expect them to build to avoid fire exposure? And iceplant fireproofs your home?

Not all developers are saintly but geeze, what they do is as legitimate and necessary as any other business. It's an easy target, give it a rest.

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By RDub on 10/24/2007 at 9:43 p.m.

Why doesn't the Navy and Marine Corps get to put the fires out, without the permission of Cal Fire? Cal Fire is too afraid to be effective in times of crisis like we have experienced, on more than one occasion...

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By mstub on 10/24/2007 at 11:23 p.m.

I wonder how much money was spent to come up that name? It should be changed to Calfire.

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By usc70 on 10/27/2007 at 5:24 p.m.

This issue is too simple: After every major fire Cal Fire is covering their rear with nonsense primarily because they want to be the Fire Service in San Diego Co. I have owned property for 13 years and have read all the excuses after each disaster. This condition will be pruned and business as usual. It's a shame the citizens of SD have to watch local news. If they would see local fire they could see what a well staffed and equipped fire agency can do, no excuses from local they put the fire out. It's money very simple. Good luck next time as the fire blows and goes.

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