Wildfires raced unchecked across San Diego County for the second straight day yesterday, forcing nearly 300,000 people – about 10 percent of the region's population – to flee their homes.

The enormity of the crisis forced county officials to grapple with the unthinkable just four years after enduring the biggest wildfire in California history.

“It's probably the worst fire this county has ever had – well worse than the Cedar fire,” said Sheriff Bill Kolender, referring to the effects from the Witch Creek fire, one of two major brushfires ravaging the county.

The blazes have killed one person and injured about three dozen others, according to hospital officials countywide. At least 13 firefighters were injured, and three remained in critical condition last night.

High winds and low humidity are expected to persist at least through today, meaning more damage is likely.

“I no longer own a suit,” said Jeff Mangum, an attorney from Poway who gathered up photos, important papers and a change of clothes before his home burned to the ground. “I have absolutely no idea where I'll be living.”

Firefighters scrambled to control up to eight separate fires at one point yesterday, and disaster officials worried the two largest blazes could burn all the way to the ocean. The coastal cities of Del Mar and Solana Beach both received mandatory evacuation orders late yesterday.

The Witch Creek fire started near Ramona on Sunday, then jumped Interstate 15 yesterday morning and spurred evacuations from Scripps Ranch to Solana Beach. By 7:30 p.m., it had burned at least 500 houses and 100 commercial properties as part of its 145,000-acre spread.

Residential areas of Poway, Rancho Bernardo and Escondido all suffered significant damage. Multimillion-dollar estates were burning in Rancho Santa Fe through last night.

Firefighters said none of the blaze was contained.
The Harris fire, the county's other major blaze, began Sunday morning near Potrero and was approaching Chula Vista last night. It has killed one person and injured at least 18 others.

The victim was identified as Thomas Varshock, 52, an environmental engineer from Potrero who died defending his home Sunday. Varshock's 15-year-old son suffered burns on more than half of his body and was being treated at UCSD Medical Center in Hillcrest.

About 25,000 acres had burned in the Harris fire and officials reported just 5 percent containment last night. Emergency crews said the blaze, which has cost $1.3 million to fight, would not likely be contained before Halloween.

Wildfires also erupted in places such as Descanso, San Marcos and Fallbrook. Up to 100 homes were destroyed in the Rice Canyon fire in Fallbrook. Another brush fire near San Marcos was contained yesterday afternoon after blackening about 300 acres.

Schools were closed across the county because of thick smoke and ash, sending thousands of children home early. Most districts will remain closed at least until tomorrow.

Private businesses and some public agencies also told employees to stay home. The San Diego Chargers, which are supposed to host the Houston Texans on Sunday, announced they would train in Arizona. No decision had been made about where the game will be played.

Most fire officials said the situation would worsen before it improves.

“With the wind blowing the way it is, it's very difficult for the firefighters to get out ahead of this thing,” state fire Chief Charles Maner said.

Promises of help poured in from Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger pledged to provide whatever assistance the county can use and said the same was promised by President Bush during a brief telephone conversation.

During a news conference yesterday afternoon, Schwarzenegger announced that 800 National Guard troops stationed at the U.S.-Mexico border would be redeployed to help provide fire relief. Three hours later, San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders said 1,200 Guardsmen were being reassigned to fire duty.

The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps provided helicopters and other aircraft to help combat the fires; the Coast Guard supplied a rescue helicopter to transport victims.

Santa Ana winds continued to gust past 60 miles an hour in some places, but firefighters were able to launch air tankers to stem some of the flames. Despite the air assaults, damage from the brush fires continued to pile up.

“We're burning in a fuel bed that hasn't burned in 25 years,” said state fire Deputy Chief Pat Kerschen.

Evacuation centers sprung up all over the county as fire victims sought refuge from the runaway flames.
Residents in at least two dozen communities from Chula Vista to Fallbrook were ordered to vacate their homes by late yesterday. Many left with pets in tow; the 2,400 stalls on the backstretch of the Del Mar Racetrack were filled with displaced horses by 9:30 yesterday morning.

Kolender, the sheriff, pleaded with residents to take the evacuation orders seriously. When homeowners refuse to leave, he said, it can divert resources from fighting the fires to rescuing people.

“We don’t want to come get them,” Kolender said. “We want them to go.”

In Crest, which was threatened by the Witch Creek fire, Joe and Janet Hart were packing their belongings into a trailer yesterday afternoon. It was the same trailer they lived in after losing their home in the 2003 Cedar fire.

“It took us three years to get in here,” said Joe Hart, 59, outside the two-story replacement home they modeled after a picture he and his wife saw in a magazine.

Down the street, Ruth Maas was piling her third batch of valuables into a van. She too lost her home in the Cedar fire.

“I can’t believe it’s happening again,” Maas said. “It’s like a movie.”

Chula Vista city officials also were recommending that people prepare to leave; residents in Rolling Hills Ranch and the Bella Lago subdivision were handed mandatory orders to leave last night.

The largest evacuation center was opened yesterday at Qualcomm Stadium, where relief workers handed out emergency supplies to thousands of people who registered as fire evacuees. Donors streamed into the massive parking lot with food, clothes and other donations.

There was significant confusion in other areas yesterday as residents struggled to figure out where to go. For example, hundreds of people from a convalescent home in Rancho Bernardo were transported to the Del Mar Fairgrounds, where they lacked mattresses, blankets, food and water yesterday afternoon.

Officials at Pomerado Hospital in Poway, taking no chances as the Witch Creek fire moved closer to their facility, moved all 75 of their patients to other sites by late morning yesterday.

The fires were wreaking havoc beyond the burn areas.

Tens of thousands of homes and businesses lost power, said San Diego Gas & Electric officials. Disaster-relief managers urged people throughout the day to stay off cell phones so fire crews could communicate more easily. Web sites aimed at keeping people informed crashed repeatedly due to overwhelming demand.

Some improvements were apparent in the emergency response to the latest wildfires, compared with the San Diego County fires four years ago.

Communication among various fire agencies has improved since the Cedar and Paradise fires, officials said. Also, almost 200,000 households were warned to evacuate by the so-called reverse 911 system. Lack of notice to residents was a significant factor in the death and destruction of the 2003 wildfires.

Even though fire crews were rolling into San Diego County from across California and the West, local officials still need more help.

By the second full day of the Cedar and Paradise fires, 12 people had lost their lives, 800 homes had been destroyed and 284,000 acres had been burned.

At the same point, more than 3,200 firefighters had arrived in San Diego County to fight the wild fires. There were about 1,900 firefighters battling the Harris and Witch fires yesterday.

Staff writers Chet Barfield, Michael Burge, Blanca Gonzalez, Alex Roth, Arthur Salm and Leonel Sanchez contributed to this report.

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Burned units at La Terraza Apartments smoldered yesterday after the Witch Creek fire moved through Rancho Bernardo.