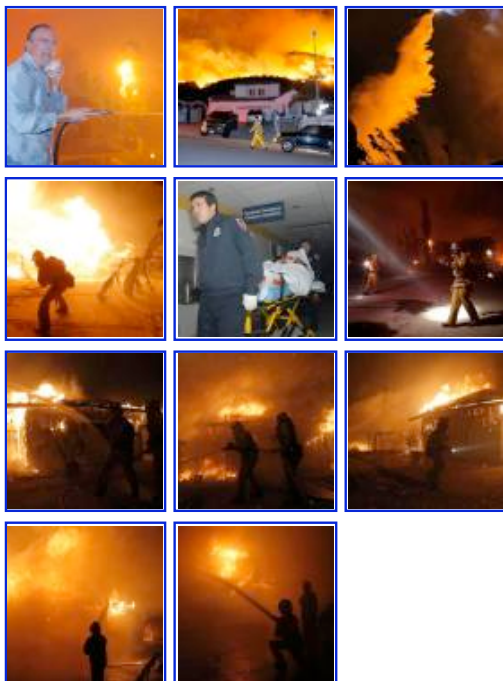


Craig Smith tries to save his home during a wildfire that destroyed a number of homes, Saturday, Nov. 15, 2008, in the Sylmar area of northern Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Mark J. Terrill)



## Thousands evacuate as fires destroy Calif. homes

By DAISY NGUYEN – 1 day ago

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A wind-blasted wildfire tore through the city's northern foothills early Saturday, sending thousands of residents fleeing in the dark, forcing a hospital to evacuate and destroying an untold number of homes.

The fire broke out late Friday in the foothill community of Sylmar on the edge of the Angeles National Forest and quickly spread across 2,600 acres — more than 4 square miles — as it was driven by Santa Ana wind gusting as high as 76 mph.

Officials said at least 10 homes were burned, but aerial footage from television helicopters showed numerous mobile homes in flames. An Associated Press photographer said a fire crew abandoned one mobile home park that was burning out of control.

Part of the area's network of highways was shut down.

Officials ordered huge evacuations in the Sylmar and Porter Ranch communities as the fire jumped two freeways, closing the highways and forcing evacuees to take surface streets.

"Near hurricane winds made it very difficult for firefighters," Los Angeles Fire deputy chief Mario Rueda said.

To the west, firefighters were still battling a separate wildfire that destroyed more than 110 homes in Santa Barbara.

The Los Angeles blaze threatened at least 1,000 buildings, fire spokeswoman Melissa Kelley said.

Flames struck the edge of the Olive View-UCLA Medical Center campus shortly after midnight, causing an electricity outage that forced officials to evacuate two dozen critical patients. About 200 other patients stayed behind.

Several administrative buildings were damaged.

The hospital's power and backup generators failed, and emergency room staff had to keep critical patients alive with hand powered ventilators. Twenty-eight people, including 10 neonatal babies, were rushed out by ambulance to another hospital.

"It was totally dark," said hospital spokeswoman Carla Nino. "There was dense smoke."

Power was restored at the hospital after three hours.

Some people refused to leave their homes, grabbing water hoses to defend their homes, but others left even before mandatory evacuation orders were issued.

"I can see the smoke. It's terrible. I'm going to take my dog and go," Dorothy Boyer told The Associated Press from her home late Friday.

More than 600 firefighters struggled to protect homes threatened by flying embers. Because of the rough terrain in the forest, they were relying on water-dropping helicopters to tackle flames. Authorities said some aircraft were grounded during the night by

the savage wind, but they expected six airplanes and a dozen helicopters to attack the fire during the day.

The shifting wind pushed the fire uphill toward the San Gabriel Mountains and downhill toward homes, sometimes skipping across canyons. It also jumped Interstate 5 and the 210 Freeway, forcing the California Highway Patrol to shut down sections of both freeways and some connecting roads.

If the fire continues marching west, it could be slowed by a fire break that resulted from a wildfire which burned about 14,000-acres near Porter Ranch last month, authorities said.

The cause of the fire was under investigation. One resident suffered serious burns, Kelley said.

The blaze also charred habitat for the endangered California condor and several hiking trails, U.S. Forest Service spokesman Stanton Florea said.

About 80 miles to the west, an uncontained blaze in the Santa Barbara community of Montecito had forced the evacuation of more than 5,400 homes since it started Thursday night, exploding through dry brush and vast stands of oil-rich eucalyptus trees. About 800 firefighters were battling the fire at the wealthy, celebrity-studded enclave, and they were expected to make significant progress through Saturday morning, said Santa Barbara city fire spokesman John Ahlman.

"There's plenty of hot material still left out there," he said. "But things could change in a hurry if the winds pick up."

Several multimillion-dollar homes and a small college suffered major damage in Montecito, a quaint and secluded area that has attracted celebrities such as Rob Lowe, Jeff Bridges, Michael Douglas and Oprah Winfrey.

The fire quickly consumed rows of luxury homes and parts of Westmont College, a Christian liberal arts school, where students spent the night in a gymnasium shelter.

"That whole mountain over there went up at once. Boom," said Bob McNall, 70, who with his son and grandson saved their home by hosing it down. "The whole sky was full of embers. There was nothing that they could do. It was just too much."

Santa Barbara Mayor Marty Blum said up to 200 homes may have been destroyed or damaged.

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

At least 13 people were injured in Montecito. A 98-year-old man with multiple medical problems died after being evacuated, but it was unclear if his death was directly related to the blaze, Santa Barbara County Sheriff-Coroner Bill Brown said.

Lowe, the actor, said he fled with his children as fire engulfed the mountain, though their home didn't burn. The family found neighbors trapped behind their automatic car gate, which was stuck because the power was out. Lowe said he helped open the big gates.

"Embers were falling. Wind was 70 miles an hour, easily, and it was just like Armageddon," Lowe told KABC-TV. "You couldn't hear yourself think."

Montecito, known for its balmy climate and charming Spanish colonial homes, has long attracted celebrities. The landmark Montecito Inn was built in the 1920s by Charlie Chaplin, and the nearby San Ysidro Ranch was the honeymoon site of John F. Kennedy in 1953.

Montecito suffered a major fire in 1977, when more than 200 homes burned. A fire in 1964 burned about 67,000 acres and damaged 150 houses and buildings.

*Bob Jablon, Solvej Schou and Denise Petski in Los Angeles and Thomas Watkins and Amy Taxin in Montecito contributed to this report.*

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