

Fresno fire crews depleted to ‘basically nothing’ from chaotic 72 hours

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The Fresno Fire Department is recovering after a 72-hour span in which virtually all of its resources were sapped fighting a half-dozen major fires within the city.

“We depleted city crews to basically nothing,” said Pete Martinez, spokesman for the Fire Department. “We are used to fighting a lot of big fires — just not as many as we had in such a short period of time.”

A four-alarm fire Tuesday in the 1300 block of North Calaveras Street scorched one home and six outbuildings —four of which were converted into housing, Martinez said. The 97-degree heat, complete with a light breeze that caused the initial fire to splinter into several, forced the Fire Department to call in a strike team of around 15 firefighters from Reedley, Sanger, Orange Cove, Clovis and Fresno County.

Some of those guys worked four days straight. We had a lot of very tired firefighters out there.

Pete Martinez, Fresno Fire Department spokesman

“It’s very rare for a strike team to be ordered out for a residential fire in a city,” Martinez said. “Normally, these teams head to incidents like the big brush fires in the forest.”

Martinez said even the department’s 13 probationary firefighters — who will formally graduate from the academy on June 26 — were in full firefighting gear and helping out.

The fire completely destroyed one home and several of the outbuildings, Martinez said. Investigators are still working to determine the total extent of the damage and the cause.

The Calaveras blaze was the finale in a flurry of fire activity that began Sunday and went through Tuesday.

Tuesday morning, firefighters battled a three-alarm blaze at Mojica Produce near Roosevelt High School. The fire spread to a neighboring salon, which sustained minor damage.

Martinez said this fire destroyed around 80% of Mojica Produce’s merchandise.

On Monday night, a fire in a bus at Maple and Church avenues in Calwa spread to the adjacent church and took the life of 45-year-old Feliciano G. Franco, who lived in the vehicle.

Firefighters also battled two large residential fires in southeast Fresno earlier that day.

On Sunday, a three-alarm fire broke out at a restaurant supply business on Van Ness Avenue near Highway 41 at about the same time a grain silo caught fire at the southern tip of the city.

The rush of fires stressed the department’s investigation office, which Martinez said consists of four investigators. They are still working to determine the causes of each fire.

Staffing challenge

Part of the city’s increase to the Fire Department’s budget will be used to hire three more investigators.

Martinez said that Fresno firefighter shifts consist of 70 on-duty firefighters working 48 hours. One shift began at 7 a.m. Sunday, meaning the same crews battled most of the fires.

The shifts changed on Tuesday morning, Martinez said, but the size of the Calaveras fire caused the department to recall some off-duty firefighters to help out.

Fresno Firefighters Local 753 union president Pete Flores said the economy played a role in taxing the Fire Department's resources and the rare need for strike team help.

"We lost six pieces of equipment, each with three or four firefighters, in 2009 budget cuts," he said. "We got one back last year, but we are still short five."

Flores said the average shift was reduced from around 88 firefighters in 2008 to 70 this year.

Given that the strike team added about 15 firefighters and five engines to the typical staff of 70 on Tuesday, the 2008 average Fresno Fire shift would have been sufficient to handle the blaze without calling for out-of-city help, he added.

"When I saw all those smaller city engines out there, I was wondering who was staffing those cities. But we are so understaffed — we really need all the help we can get."

Flores said that other cities of similar size in California have larger departments. For example, Long Beach keeps around 110 firefighters on per shift for its population of around 470,000. Fresno has more than 500,000 people.

"We are looking for around 100 firefighters on duty per day."

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin was not available for interview Thursday, but released a statement on the department's resources.

"In spite of continuing fiscal constraints, we are now able to start restoring staffing levels, replace aging equipment and buy a new communications system in the coming year," she said.

Swearengin acknowledged that Fresno Fire Department is one of the busiest in the state and praised its firefighters and Fresno Fire Chief Kerri Donis. She added that the city will provide four new fire engines next week to go along with the academy's graduating class.

Heat adds to challenge

Extra manpower was needed Tuesday for two main reasons: the Calaveras fire's bizarre spread and the 97-degree heat.

Martinez said that because the fire spread to four different locations, firefighters had to man four areas for the duration of the battle — more than three hours.

The strike team firefighters took the place of the firefighters holding down three minor fire areas, Martinez said. Many of these firefighters were extremely tired and were sent back to their stations, where they took a quick rest before heading out to yet another fire later Tuesday at a mobile home park west of Highway 99.

Breaks during hot weather are a high priority for the department. It recently instituted a policy that requires all firefighters to take water and cooling breaks at least once during the time it takes to use two oxygen tanks — typically around 15 to 20 minutes.

The cooling stations have water, Gatorade and shade. Personnel from American Ambulance also monitor the vital signs of those resting to check for things like dehydration and heat stroke.

Martinez said that major fires stress the department because it must assign enough firefighters to allow for these

breaks. Strings of these incidents test firefighters' stamina even further, requiring more breaks.

No injuries to firefighters or occupants were reported on Tuesday, Martinez said.

While noting that Tuesday's events were uncommon, Martinez said the department is readying for a busy season as summer dawns in the fourth year of a drought.

"I don't know if we followed normal operating procedures to the letter (on Tuesday), but we are preparing for the worst."

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