

GBU News Special

Rancho Fire

July 22, 2013 S2

The Rancho Fire

by Gunnar J Kuepper

On Friday, July 19, starting at 11:57am the first reports of a fire next to the southbound lanes of the Interstate 5 reached CHP's 9-1-1 Center. The fire was located west of the Interstate and about a mile north of the Fort Tejon Exit. The flames went quickly up the steep hill in south-westerly direction towards Digier Road at 12:30:



At that time Kern County Fire Engine 55 with firefighter Brandon Hill was all that was present at Digier Road.

Despite his best efforts, the flames, driven by heavy and gusty winds, crossed Digier road at 12:39pm:



Due to the danger created by veracious flames Engine 55 (and myself) had to drive away and downhill towards Fort Tejon. Every couple hundred feet the engine operator stopped and tried to douse the flames, to no avail despite his bravery. The heat and particularly the incredible dense smoke with a nearly complete loss of visibility were just incredible:



At this time flames were following us going south on both sides of Digier Road. The fire to the western side also continued to climb uphill through tall dry grass and brush.

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The flames reached the little forest with old Oak trees, just south of the Tejon Pump Station at 4237 Digier Road at 12:46.



and created a zero-visibility condition in the middle of a sunny summer day:



Arriving at the open space at the Tejon Pump Station at 1:00pm we were met by a variety of other fire and law

enforcement vehicles as well as engine companies from the US Angeles National Forest:



The crews quickly decided to make a stand and stop the flames in the area between Digier Road and Interstate 5. A ground attack with Kern County Fire Engine 55 and crews from the US Angeles National Forest was launched at 1:05pm:



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The activities were documented by Los Padres National Forest Law Enforcement Officer Brian St. Clair:



and videotaped by the first media crews from Bakersfield:



While the flames east of Digier Road had been successfully extinguished I was wondering about the Fort Tejon Park and its historic buildings. The progress of the fast moving flames on the west side of Didier Road climbing uphill and in a south-westerly direction had not been stopped. Leaving the Tejon Pump Station I drove less than a mile south to the Fort Tejon. I arrived there at 1:20pm. The entire park was covered with thick smoke and already evacuated. Fortunately the fire and flames itself had moved west deep into the canyon and hills and spared the historic buildings and park:



At the same time in the parking lot in front of the Fort Tejon Historic Park a command post was established. Fire Chiefs and law enforcement officials, including deputies from Kern County Sheriff's Department were exchanging information about the fire situation and the ongoing evacuation of people and homes in the Digier Canyon area:



It was reported that 23 residences along Digier Road were approached by deputies and asked to evacuate. Fifteen families decided to stay while only two evacuated.

Following my visit at this Command Post around 1:30pm I went to the El Tejon Middle School on the other / east side of the Freeway. Antony Romero, the Public Information Officer (PIO) for the Kern County Fire Department had just arrived and provided me with an update on the fire. Information was very sketchy at this time and it was estimated that the fire had already burned 1,500 acres (the number was later corrected to 400 acres for that time).

The official numbers announced at 3:40pm by the Kern County Fire Department included 88 Fire Personnel with 6 Engines, 5 Patrols, 4 Water tenders, as well as air support from 3 Helicopters and 4 Air tankers either in operations, en-route, or assigned to the Rancho Fire.

Now knowing and seeing with my own eyes that no structures were in imminent danger I drove back to Frazier Park around 2:00pm, worked on my photographs and provided the readers of the GBU Mountain News with an update. The entire area from Fort Tejon to the Tejon Pass, from Lebec, to Frazier Park, to at least Lake of the Woods was covered in thick greyish smoke that for the most part eclipsed even the sun.

Around 5:00pm in the afternoon I drove back to the fire site. I met first with PIO Anthony Romero at the El Tejon Middle School who gave me a more accurate overview of the situation. The wind had died down and, subsequently, the progress of the –wind driven- flames had decreased significantly. El Tejon Middle School was becoming a basecamp with dozens of fire vehicles and

numerous firefighters from a variety of agencies now ready for assignment.

At 5:50pm I arrived –again- at the Fort Tejon Historic Park. Not only was the park spared by the flames but all the smoke from hours earlier was completely gone. It was a rather lovely site in the evening with a clear blue sky:



Numerous deer wandered through the vacated park, enjoying the fresh green grass away from the smoky and burning hillsides:



That serene image changed somewhat about half a mile deeper into Fort Tejon canyon. I came to the State Park maintenance and administration campus around 6:00pm and met crews from Kern County, the US Forest Service, and California State Parks still battling the flames that were slowly moving along the hillsides.

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One of the many teams was the Kern County Fire “Iron Firefighters” crew from Taft. Dozers are crucial in any brush / wildland fire to create firebreaks and stop the flames from progressing, particularly into populated areas.



At the same time a Forest Service Hand Crew received their instructions to go into the steep terrain and work on fire and hotspots:



Around 6:30pm I went to the area where I first encountered the fire more than six hours earlier. The image below is from the same spot as photo No 1 on page 1. The fire has left scorched earth, as every wildfire does:



The fire has left scorched earth, as every wildfire does. Fortunately the fast moving flames hours ago went through grass and low brush. It did not ignite or destroy the beautiful and oftentimes very old Oak trees in the Digier Road area:



At 9:00pm on Friday evening the Kern County Fire Department stated that an area of 730 acres has been consumed by the fire, and that 400 personnel are assigned to the fire. A containment of 56% had been achieved and "crews will continue to construct line around the fire and continue to provide structure protection at Oak Knolls Road in Digier Canyon Road". Saturday morning at 9:00am 500+ fire personnel had achieved a containment of 65% and the fire had stayed at now 720 acres. 85% containment with no increase of the fire area (still 720 acres) was reported Saturday (July 20) evening.

As of Monday (July 22) early morning, more than 500 fire personnel have been involved in the response and recovery efforts using four air tankers, five helicopters, three dozers, 29 engines, and other equipment.

Many of these crews have been working on rehabilitation for the fire area. Rehabilitation consists of repairing soil disturbed by fire damage and suppression activities. This is a vital part of the overall operation to ensure the sustainability of the forest watershed, to diminish the potential for debris flow and to help mitigate the introduction of invasive weed species.

Participating agencies include the Kern County Fire Department, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Cal Fire, U.S. Forest Service, Los Angeles and Ventura County Fire, Kern County Sheriff's Department, California Highway Patrol (CHP), California State Parks, CalTrans.

The Kern County Fire Department announced on Sunday (July 21) evening that the fire "has burned approximately 722 acres and is 92% contained. A local interagency type three incident management team has been implemented to manage the fire by using local agreements in order to

reduce fire suppression costs. With favorable conditions, full containment of the fire is expected on Wednesday and full control by Thursday at 6:00P.M."

More images from this and other Wildland Fires can be viewed on Facebook at <GBU Photography> or directly at

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.604466009576377.1073741834.109453262410990&type=3>

Very special thanks to my friends and neighbors Susan & Tom Thompson for their generous support. Without their assistance this report would not have been possible.

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this Friday (July 27) from 5 to 6pm**

Portrait shots with you and / or your pet only....for less than \$10 (print included)



Bring your favorite outfit, accessories, and props for your pet photo and let's create an amazing photo in our

beautiful mountain park.

Meet me from 5 to 6pm at the duck pond (across from the library); reservations welcome 661-402-2717 but not necessary. Gunnar aka The Photographer

Important Phone Numbers

Fire 911
Ambulance 911
Sheriff or CHP 911

Frazier Park Sheriff Station 661-245-3440

Frazier Park Public Utility/Water District 661-245-3734

Southern California Edison 800-655-4555

Southern California Gas 800-427-2200

Pacific Gas & Electric (PGE) 800-743-5000

El Tejon School District 661-248-6247

Pine Mountain Club Patrol 661-242-3857

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