Fires on Second Front Force Californians Out

David McNew/Getty Images

Smoke from the Gap fire hung in the air on Friday near Goleta, Calif. The fast-moving fire was being fueled by a shift in winds.

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER
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LOS ANGELES — A fast-moving fire in Goleta, Calif., just north of Santa Barbara, has forced nearly 2,000 residents from their homes, as a shift in winds and the availability of timber fuel combined on Friday to trump fires to the north as the state's first priority.

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Bill Draper and his wife, Zola, on Friday at an evacuation shelter for residents fleeing the Gap fire near Santa Barbara, Calif.

Labeled the Gap fire, it was only 10 percent contained on Friday. It has burned through 5,400 acres and threatened 2,674 structures, officials said.

Across the state on Friday, 60 active fires, fueled by decades of old brush and brutally efficient winds, were burning actively, officials said, with nearly 600,000 acres scorched. State highways and local roads were closed throughout California as scores of firefighters scrambled to control the blazes.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger ordered 400 soldiers from the California National Guard to reinforce firefighters battling flames in the north. One volunteer firefighter died Thursday while working as a spotter on a fire in Mendocino County.

Thousands of residents from the top of the state to its celebrated Central Coast repeated the grim ritual of leaving homes and securing precious objects from ferocious blazes. It is a drill that has seemed to come earlier and more often in this drought-plagued state, where many people have chosen to live in remote areas near combustible timber.

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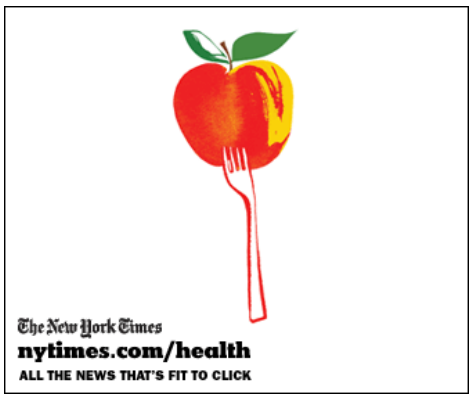

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The most worrisome blazes were hundreds of miles apart — the Gap fire, where high winds posed a grave threat to homes, and the fire near the Big Sur area of the coast, where thousands of residents and guests of coastal resorts evacuated.

Near Big Sur, the fire known as the Basin Complex had destroyed at least 20 structures by Friday morning, and had circled at least one of the area's famed resorts, where firefighters and others sprayed buildings with retardant as ash rained down and smoke billowed.

The Basin Complex fire, believed to have been sparked by lightning earlier this week, has burned through 65,303 acres as it has crept down from remote wooded areas toward more residential areas along Highway 1. Two people have suffered minor injuries, said Rolf Larsen, a spokesman for the Los Padres National Forest. Although residents have been asked by state officials to evacuate, "some folks have decided to stay, and the police can't force them to leave," Mr. Larsen said.

Flames from the Gap blaze in Goleta have reached the edge of the footprint of an early 1990s fire that destroyed 400 homes. Hundreds of firefighters, aided by volunteers and the National Guard, were fighting to save homes and other structures in the area.

"The Basin fire poses more logistical difficulties because it is burning in inaccessible areas," Mr. Larsen said. "On the other hand the Gap fire has more folks involved in a congested population area, so that one poses more risks for life and property. There is extremely heavy brush and steep terrain."

On Thursday, Robert Roland, a 63-year-old volunteer firefighter, died in a Mendocino County hospital after collapsing while he worked as a lookout in a fire north of San Francisco Bay. His death was the first of a firefighter this season.

Wildfires have scorched nearly 800 square miles and destroyed at least 65 structures across Northern and Central California since June. Last October, nine people were killed and some 1,500 homes destroyed in fires in California.

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