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California's bad fire season could have been worse

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It's been big, it's been bad, it's been weird. And it could have been worse.

Even as flames continued to devour the hills near Santa Barbara and homes in the San Fernando Valley on Saturday, fire season was winding down across Northern California.

And although hot dry conditions still could spark more blazes in places like San Diego or Los Angeles County, the 2008 fire season is already being considered one of the most unusual in recent history.

Through last week, 1.24 million acres burned in California, the most since 1970, when consistent, modern records were first kept.

Yet in a rare turnabout, most of that land didn't burn in Southern California during autumn, a common pattern for the state. Even counting this weekend's fires in Montecito and Sylmar, nine out of 10 acres that have burned this year were in Northern California, from Monterey County to the Oregon border, and most burned early in the season, thanks to a freakish dry lightning storm. Given the lack of rain over the past two winters, things could have turned out much worse, experts say.

"We got lucky this year. We have didn't that many hot dry, windy days this summer. And that's why the fire season has progressed the way it has," said Max Moritz, co-director of the Center for Fire Research

and Outreach at the University of California-Berkeley.

Nobody knows for sure why it wasn't particularly windy or extremely hot in Southern California in August, September or October, conditions that often fuel big fires, Moritz said, highlighting the need for better weather research by fire officials going forward.

The summer began in a terrifying way.

Dry lightning June 20 overwhelmed fire crews from Mount Shasta to Big Sur. At one point, more than 2,000 fires were burning at the same time. The driest spring since the 1920s already had left trees and brush like tinder. Politicians, fire planners and many Californians worried the state would be burning unchecked for months.

"There was a definite level of concern. We thought: Wow, our folks are going to be exhausted pretty quick, and we weren't even halfway through the summer," said Jason Kirchner, a spokesman for the U.S. Forest Service.

Early start

Eight of the 10 largest fires in California this year started June 20 or 21 during the lightning storm, including the Basin fire, which burned for six weeks in Big Sur, blackening 162,000 acres and destroying 58 homes and other buildings.

At the peak in mid-July, there were more than 24,000 firefighters in California from 46 states to battle the blazes.

As the days wore on, fire commanders nervously wondered if Southern California was going to go up at the same time, possibly repeating the disastrous blazes of 2003 and 2007 when thousands of homes in San Diego and San Bernardino counties were

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reduced to ashes.

"A lot of us were sitting around on pins and needles keeping our eye on the weather forecasts, just hoping and praying it wouldn't take a turn for the worse," Kirchner said.

Until this weekend, it didn't. A combination of lucky weather and public prudence driven by fear, say experts, resulted in no major fire storms in Southern California until this weekend.

Santa Ana winds, which are famous for whipping up fires in Southern California, didn't blow much in September and October, as they have this weekend — a deviation from their normal patterns — and when they did, they weren't strong.

For most of the summer, the damage stayed in the north. Fire crews recovered. And much of the acreage burned wasn't in towns, but in the remote forests of Trinity, Siskiyou and Mendocino counties, where some fires were allowed to burn for weeks while firefighters protected more populated areas.

Final totals aren't completed yet. And certainly more fires could erupt in Southern California. But so far this year, roughly 1,700 homes and other structures have burned in wildland fires, according to state records.

By comparison, the Oakland Hills fire in 1991 destroyed 2,900 homes and killed 25 people. The Cedar fire in San Diego in 2003 destroyed 4,847 homes and killed 15 people.

"It was a different type of year. Weather, wind conditions, those kind of things can make a dramatic difference," Ruben Grijalva, chief of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, said Thursday.

Season's end

Because of cooler temperatures and some rainfall, the department began reducing staffing Monday back to winter levels at its stations in 36 of the state's 58 counties, including every Bay Area county. Southern California stations remained at full staffing. Each year in winter, state officials lay off about 1,500 seasonal firefighters, keeping a contingent of roughly 5,000. They also let contracts for extra helicopters and bulldozers go dormant and reopen stations in the spring, usually April or May.

In a shift that began Monday, in Santa Clara County, 10 of the 16 CDF stations have closed for the winter.

"This year was kind of a moderate year. We had a huge potential because of the lack of water, the drought," said Chris Morgan, a spokesman for the department's Santa Clara Ranger Unit in Morgan Hill. "We did pretty well. We threw everything we had at fires and we kept most of them fairly small."

There were three significant fires in the South Bay this year.

On May 22, a fire broke out on Summit Road and Maymen Flats near the Santa Clara-Santa Cruz county line, charring 4,270 acres and destroying 35 homes. The cost of fighting that fire totaled \$16 million. The following month, on June 11, a 520-acre blaze in Bonny Doon destroyed three homes, costing the state \$5 million to extinguish. And barely a week later, a car's exhaust sparked the Trabling fire along Highway 1 north of Watsonville, destroying 10 homes and 630 acres.

The Summit fire, in particular, which early reports suggested was started by a landowner burning piles of brush, got the attention of many Bay Area residents.

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They cleared bushes and trees within a 100-foot perimeter of their homes, as state law requires.

"We had people requesting inspections. We normally don't get that," Morgan said.

Rick Parfitt, a software engineer who lives off Summit Road, is working with the nonprofit Santa Clara County FireSafe Council to help reduce fire risk in the wooded communities between Summit Road and Lexington Reservoir.

"The Summit fire sure got people motivated. There's a lot more chipping going on this year," Parfitt said. "And winter is a good time remove limbs and chip. It's less harmful to prune trees when they become dormant, and there's less risk of starting a fire from chain saws."

Although the danger for the north has largely passed, dry, windy conditions will continue to pose a risk to Southern California for weeks to come.

"We're not out of the woods yet," Kirchner said. "We've had major fires on Thanksgiving and Christmas."

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