

## EAST BAY TIMES

### **Immigrants might be to blame for wildfire**

25 July 2006

ALPINE — A 7,000-acre wildfire that forced the evacuation of more than a hundred homes near the California-Mexico border may have been caused by an abandoned campfire set by illegal immigrants, authorities said Monday.

The fire had burned nearly 11 square miles of brush and chaparral in the Cleveland National Forest in southern San Diego County.

It appeared to have spread early Saturday from an abandoned campfire set in a side drainage of a canyon, the U.S. Forest Service said in a statement. Evidence at the scene suggested “the campfire was left by undocumented immigrants,” it said.

Forest Service spokeswoman Anabele Cornejo said she had no details on what evidence investigators found.

It prompted sheriff’s deputies to order 125 homes evacuated in the town of Alpine starting Sunday. Residents throughout parts of Pine Valley and Lake Morena, where there are about 1,350 homes combined, were told to remain on standby, said sheriff’s spokeswoman Susan Plese.

More than 1,500 homes and 100 commercial properties could be threatened by the fire, which was about 5 percent contained, but the threat was not immediate, officials said.

Fire crews worked in blistering temperatures as California’s heat wave lengthened. Five firefighters around the state have suffered heat-related illnesses, officials said.

“If you get behind on drinking water, you can’t catch up,” said firefighter Jon Sanchioli, 46.

who was protecting structures from the forest fire. “We had one guy go down yesterday. We know you’ve got to be careful. If you keep on pushing, your body shuts down.”

Monday’s high in the forest was expected to reach 105 degrees, compounded by humidity, according to the National Weather Service. With a 40 percent chance of showers, the area could cool down soon, officials said.

In Joshua Tree National Park — where a blaze had consumed 1,050-acre acres of dense, desert vegetation — fire supervisors were asking crews working in temperatures up to 103 degrees to remove their helmets every hour to make sure they were still sweating, said fire spokesman Dennis Cross.

No sweat, he said, could mean a firefighter had “dried up” — a sign of heat exhaustion.

“It probably feels like it’s 150 up there,” said Dennis Cross, spokesman for the Joshua Tree fire, adding that crews were drinking about the twice the amount of water and Gatorade they might otherwise consume.

“When you have this humidity and this heat, it really takes a toll on your body,” he said.

The blaze, burning across 1.6 square miles near the Riverside-San Bernardino county line, destroyed a park-owned cabin. It was 67 percent contained.

Farther north, more than 800 firefighters worked to cut lines around an 8,200-acre, or nearly 13-square-mile, fire on ranch land east of San Ardo in southeastern Monterey County.

A lightning strike late Saturday sparked the fire, and erratic winds generated by thunderstorms caused it to spread, officials said.

Off the coast of Los Angeles County, a lightning-sparked fire on Santa Catalina Island was 40 percent contained at 700 acres, or a bit more than a square mile, officials said.

Elsewhere, a 447-acre blaze in the Cajon Pass that clogged traffic on Interstate 15 was nearly contained. The fire started about 11:30 a.m. Saturday and led to evacuation of two ranches. Several unoccupied buildings burned.

The cause was under investigation.