

## Local firefighters aid in Southern California firefighting

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson  
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LAKE COUNTY &ndash; A strike team of local firefighters is in Southern California assisting with the efforts to fight wildfires that have claimed hundreds of homes and burned tens of thousands of acres.

Five engines &ndash; one each from Lake County Fire Protection, Kelseyville Fire, Northshore Fire, Anderson Valley and Hopland &ndash; left on Sunday, said Lake County Fire Protection Battalion Chief Willie Sapeta.

The group included three firefighters per engine, said Sapeta.

Chief Jim Robbins of Northshore Fire said his district sent two battalion chiefs, Jamie Crabtree and Pat Brown, to serve as strike team leaders.

Capt. Dave Bosserman of Kelseyville Fire said their three firefighters got the call to go at 3:30 a.m. Sunday. They took with them a type-three fire engine, which he described as a four-wheel-drive truck with a pump system on it, which is good for wildland firefighting.

Sapeta said his firefighters pulled out at 7:15 a.m. Sunday.

The firefighters got to their destination in Southern California last night at about 10 p.m., said Robbins.

Robbins said they were assigned to the nearly 29,000-acre Freeway Complex, which Cal Fire reports includes the Freeway and Landfill fires. Nearly 3,700 firefighters are currently assigned to that complex.

The fires started in Riverside County and are now burning through rugged terrain in Orange County. Cal Fire says the complex is 40-percent contained.

The local strike team was assigned to a 24-hour rotation to work the fires, said Robbins. Sapeta added that the firefighters were due to be on the fireline first thing Monday.

&ldquo;They were going with five other strike teams to the head of the fire,&rdquo; said Robbins. &ldquo;They know the Lake County boys can put the fire out.&rdquo;

He spoke with firefighters Monday morning after their briefing. Brown told him about the eerie experience of driving down Highway 71, the Chino Valley Freeway, and finding its eight lanes barricaded and empty of all but fire traffic.

Over the weekend Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proclaimed a state of emergency in Orange, Riverside and Los Angeles counties due to a devastating series of wildland fires that have hit the area beginning Nov. 14. Santa Ana winds have assisted in fueling and moving the fires, according to officials.

A day earlier, Santa Barbara County was hit with the Tea Fire, now at 95-percent containment, with an estimated 210 homes destroyed, Cal Fire reported.

Sapeta said they have no idea how long the local firefighters will be needed in Southern California, although they have a seven-day minimum and 14-day maximum commitment period, after which they'll be switched out if more help is needed.

Local firefighters have ventured out of the county to offer assistance on fires in other regions several times this year, said Sapeta.

In May, a strike team was sent to the Summit Fire burning in the Santa Cruz Mountains, then the Humboldt Fire in Butte County and the Mendocino Lightning Complex in June, and to Santa Clara County in July. Local fire districts sent nine ambulances to Colusa County in October when a bus crash occurred, killing several people.

Lake County has received its fair share of help this year. Cal Fire, the US Forest Services and fire agencies from around the state converged in Lake County in June to fight the 14,500 Walker Fire east of Clearlake Oaks and the 8,652-acre Soda Complex burned from June to July in the Mendocino National Forest.

While it was very busy in the beginning of the fire season, until recently it had quieted down, said Sapeta.

Sapeta said there have been some years where local strike teams have been called out during the winter months of January and February in response to Southern California wildfires fueled by those devastating Santa Ana winds, which can make a fire deadly at any time of year.

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