

Border Patrol searches rugged corridor for fire victims

ELLIOT SPAGAT
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Four bodies, believed to be migrants, found near checkpoint Thursday

SAN DIEGO — Border Patrol agents scoured fire-ravaged ravines and canyons Friday for dead bodies after discovering the charred remains of four people in a remote but heavily trafficked crossing corridor for illegal immigrants from Mexico.

The bodies, believed to be migrants, were found in the woods Thursday near a remote Border Patrol checkpoint that was evacuated Monday as wildfires swept toward federal agents.

The fires also led the patrol to limit its presence on the border by reassigning about 115 agents around the clock to direct traffic and

knock on doors to evacuate homes in San Diego's urban sprawl. About 200 of the 600 National Guard troops who help patrol California's border with Mexico were also reassigned to keep the peace among evacuees at Qualcomm Stadium.

The Border Patrol reopened its checkpoint Thursday on Highway 94, a two-lane road that straddles the U.S.-Mexico border. The building remained intact, but flames torched a tow truck.

Shortly after the agency returned to full force in the area Thursday, it reported the discovery of four bodies near the checkpoint, apparently two men and two women. The

San Diego County medical examiner's office said Friday that the ages and nationalities of the dead were unknown. It was unclear when they died.

It's impossible to know how many took advantage of the Border Patrol's absence but some tried. A 20-year-old Mexican man was seriously injured Monday when he and five others sought refuge from firefighters, according to Alberto Lozano, a spokesman for the Mexican Consulate in San Diego. He and five others who suffered moderate burns were treated at a San Diego hospital.

The Border Patrol said it has arrested more than 200

migrants since Sunday in the area torched by the Harris fire, which has burned 84,000 acres and continued to spread slowly Friday in a well-trekked area near Portrero, about 35 miles east of San Diego.

"They figured there was a good chance to get through because the Border Patrol wasn't around," said Joe Mason, a Border Patrol supervisor. "They knew we're off doing other things."

One agent, Clint Thielmann, said he arrested three migrants as they fled down a ravine, about a half-mile from the fire Monday morning, shortly before the Border Patrol withdrew. "They had no

backpacks, no water," he said.

The fire spread to the Mexican side of the border early in the week near Tecate, where four migrants sought help from Mexican authorities after a failed attempt to cross the border.

"Their eyes were irritated and they were hungry and thirsty and wanted us to help them get to Tijuana so they could go home," said Jose Luis Hernandez, the Tecate coordinator of Mexico's Grupo Beta migrant protection agency.

Aside from the safety risks, illegal immigrants had other reasons to stay away from the fires.

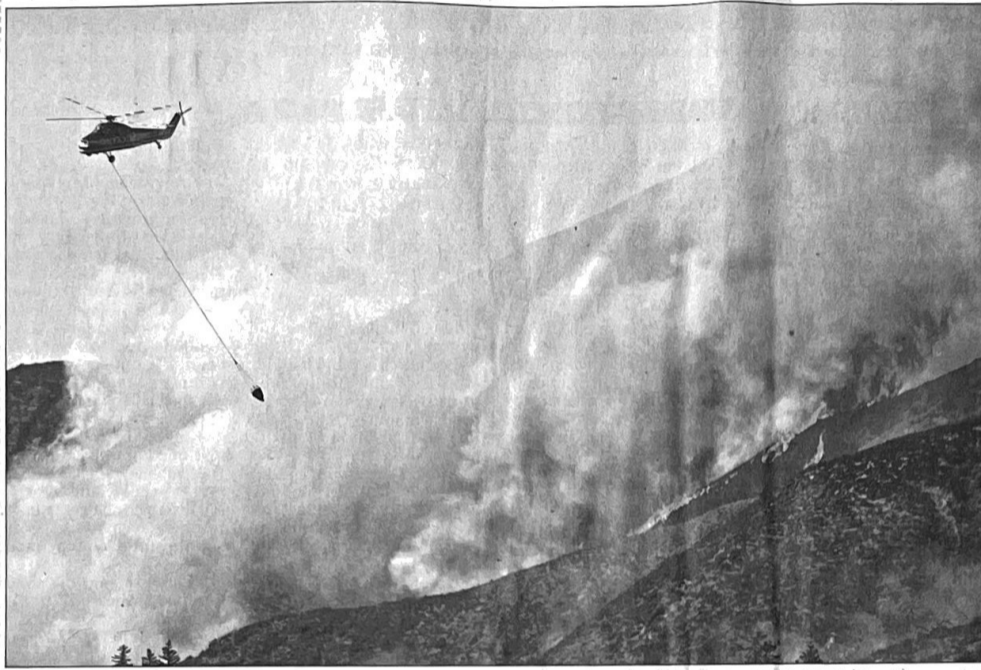
Migrants depend on driv-

ers, and roads in the area were closed much of the week. Typically, migrants pay about \$1,500 each to be guided through the canyons for hours, even days, and be picked up by someone on the side of the road for the drive to San Diego.

Heightened border enforcement in the 1990s in San Diego pushed migrants to mountains that rise to 4,000 feet within about 60 miles from the Pacific Ocean. The area is dotted with small towns and horse farms.

The fire may cause migrants to rethink whether it makes sense to cross elsewhere because it is more difficult to hide in the barren hills.

"It should make our job a little easier," Mason said.



BILL WECHTER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A firefighting helicopter maneuvers after dropping water on a fire on a mountainside on the north side of Highway 76 just east of the La Jolla Indian Reservation on Friday.

Experts warn about risks from air quality

CITY NEWS SERVICE

SAN DIEGO — Poor air quality could pose a health problem in the region even after the fires are out, prompting the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency on Friday to urge residents to protect themselves.

"It's extremely important for people to minimize exposure to ash and dust from the firestorm," Dr. Wilma Wooten, San Diego County's public health officer, said in a statement.

"Today, the air quality is moderate to unhealthy for sensitive groups in most areas," she said. "Keep in mind that the air quality will improve in the coming days, but as we found out during the 2003 firestorm, air quality can be an issue for many days after the fires are out."

Those most at risk for complication from the smoke and ash include children, the elderly and those with heart and

lung disease, such as asthma or other respiratory ailments, according to the HHSA.

Healthy people may also suffer from irritation of the eyes, nose, throat and lungs.

Precautions the HHSA said residents should take when cleaning homes, businesses and communities include:

- Do not use leaf blowers;
- Do not hose ash into drains;
- Use only vacuums with high efficiency filters;
- Avoid skin contact with ash;
- If the skin comes in contact with ash, wash immediately;
- Wear a well-fitting dust mask; and
- Put collected ash into a trash bag.

"The most important thing to remember is to lightly mist indoor and outdoor surfaces before gently sweeping ash," Wooten said. "On lightly dusted areas, a damp cloth or wet mop may be all that is needed."

Officials plan review of aircraft issues

State to examine ways to get aerial firefighting aid up in air quickly

MICHAEL R. BLOOD
ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES — California officials said Friday they will look into ways to get more firefighting aircraft into the air quickly when flames break out, amid criticism that some aircraft remained grounded during the crucial early hours of this week's fires.

The Associated Press reported Thursday that nearly two dozen military helicopters stayed grounded for up to a day because state personnel who must be on board were not immediately available. And the AP reported the California National Guard's two C-130 cargo planes couldn't help because they've yet to be outfitted with tanks needed to carry thousands of gallons of fire retardant, though that was promised four years ago.

Air Force Gen. Gene Renhart, who heads U.S. Northern Command, told the AP in an interview Friday that he would push the Air Force to get the planes fitted with new tanks and hopes to have the work done before the beginning of the 2008 fire season next fall.

Meanwhile, state officials who have held that dangerous weather conditions were the reason more aircraft weren't in the sky when the flames took hold, said Friday they would look at rules regarding "fire spotters," also called "helicopter managers."

"We're going to look at our helicopter manager situation and see if we can't make it better," said David Hillman, a deputy director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The managers play a crucial role on flights, coordinating communication and water or retardant drops among



KEVORK DJANSEZIAN / ASSOCIATED PRESS

A sky crane helicopter scoops up water from the TPC Valencia golf course in Valencia as smoke rises from the Stevenson Ranch fire north of Los Angeles on Monday.

aircraft and firefighters on the ground. Under state rules, each state or military helicopter must have a manager.

But there weren't enough available for all the aircraft ready to fly in the first days of the fires that now have scorched a half-million acres and destroyed more than 1,700 homes from Malibu to San Diego County.

Rep. Brian Bilbray, a Republican who represents parts of San Diego, was among lawmakers whose criticism of the aerial response helped prompt state forestry department Director Ruben Grijalva to alter policy Wednesday and let one spotter orchestrate drops for a squadron of three helicopters.

Hillman blamed the shortage on funding. "If you could convince the Legislature to pump some money into the ... budget, I can have some more people," he said.

Hillman said helicopter managers double as firefighters, so when the flames broke out "virtually everybody was committed almost instantly" to fighting fires on the ground.

Rep. Duncan Hunter said the state forestry division should have planned better so spotters would be available whenever a helicopter was ready to fly.

The lack of organization that left helicopters stranded "was a bureaucratic condition that was established by the state," said Hunter, who represents part of San Diego and is running for the Republican presidential nomination. "When asked to satisfy their own condition, they announced they couldn't."

There were other regulatory and coordination issues that may have hampered early firefighting efforts.

State rules allow helicopter crews up to 24 hours to report once they've been called up. At the state National Guard, it took nearly a full day for crews to assemble after the call for help went out at 4 p.m. Sunday. Spotters were the last to show, by which time winds had grounded the helicopters.

Assemblyman Pedro Nava, a Santa Barbara Democrat who heads the Joint Legislative Committee on Emergency Services and Homeland Security, said he would hold hearings to review why more spotters weren't available.

"The Legislature has an obligation to take a look at the patchwork of regulations that has developed over time to see whether any of the make sense anymore," he said.

Richard Carson, a UC San Diego economist who studies

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— DAVID HILLMAN
Deputy director, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection

disaster preparation and response, wondered why it took until Wednesday for C-130s from elsewhere to arrive if California officials knew the state National Guard doesn't have any of its own C-130s capable of fighting fires.

On Sunday afternoon, "those planes should have been loaded up with crews and flown here immediately," he said.

Another issue: Unlike some local governments including the city of Los Angeles, the state forestry department does not pay to keep contract helicopters on standby so they are ready to fly at a moment's notice to support the state's fleet of aircraft.

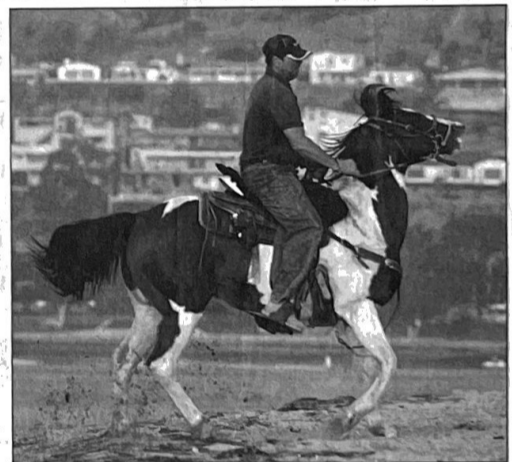
At least one contractor called in by the state last weekend was unable to go to the fires immediately because the helicopter was committed elsewhere.

Again, Hillman said financial issues were in play.

"It's more economical for us to call them when we need them" than to keep them on standby, he said.

Senate Republican leader Dick Ackerman of Irvine said the Legislature will need to closely examine issues like spotters and the possibility of hiring more full-time pilots.

"Everybody acknowledges we have to talk about how do you deal with those issues," he said. "We'll make improvements."



CHRIS CARLSON / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Oscar Gonzalez rides his horse Sassy on Fiesta Island on Thursday after they evacuated due to wildfires in San Diego County.

Animals, owners find refuge on Fiesta Island

GILLIAN FLACCUS
ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN DIEGO — For the last week, the residents of Fiesta Island have included upright horses, frightened finches and designer dogs — as well as pet owners trying to make it all seem like home.

The island in Mission Bay became an animal refuge after wildfires broke out last weekend across Southern California.

Dozens of horse trailers lined the beach, and horses grazed on hay in makeshift corrals or trotted along the water's edge.

Oscar Gonzalez, 52, was not sure if his 16-acre home-

menagerie and their supplies — but no provisions for himself or his wife — as they fled flames that came within 100 yards of their house.

As a smoky scent hung in the air Thursday, motor boats streaked by on the bay and farmers shod horses.

"They're not used to having so many people around," Gonzalez said. "You have all this commotion, all these boats coming up here, they get nervous."

For Christopher Richter, who moved his four horses, eight dogs and four cats at least five times during the week, the peace of Fiesta Island felt therapeutic.

"When we got here, there was smoke around, but the air quality for us and our animals was a lot better because of the breezes," he said.

One of his friends was fleeing the town of Ramona with three horses in tow when the fire overtook the horse trailer, killing the animals. His friend escaped the cab with seconds to spare.