

# News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
October 31, 2003

CONTACT:  
Roy Stearns  
(916) 654-7538  
Brian Cahill  
(760) 767-3716

## Worst Fire in State Parks' History

### **Fires Destroy Offices, Historic Buildings, Homes, and Campgrounds at State Parks**

SACRAMENTO – California State Parks has suffered the worst wildfire loss of its 139 year history.

The advancing flames have destroyed just over 30,000 acres of pristine woodland resources at three different parks, Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, both located in San Diego County, and Silverwood Lake State Recreation Area, located near San Bernardino. The loss includes Black Oak and pine forests, grasslands, riparian corridors and animal habitat.

In addition, flames have destroyed at least 10 historic structures. Three campground facilities with individual campsites, restrooms, kiosk entrance stations and maintenance buildings have been destroyed. Several hundred picnic sites in day use areas have been destroyed. Ten homes of State Park employees have been destroyed, two others damaged.

“We’ve had a really rough time this week and many of our people are hurting today,” said Mat Fuzie, Acting Superintendent of the Colorado Desert District. “It is quite a moonscape out there and it will be a long time before we reopen many of the places within the affected parks.”

The worst fire damage occurred at Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, located east of San Diego, where 24,614 acres burned. At Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, adjacent to Cuyamaca, 4,985 acres of mixed forest was burned. At Silverwood Lake State Recreation Area, near San Bernardino, about 1,000 acres of woodland was destroyed.

“We have been devastated,” said State Park Director Ruth Coleman. “The reports coming into my office are very disheartening. We have lost priceless cultural and historic structures. We have lost offices and other operations facilities. We have lost tens of thousands

of acres of pristine wilderness and forests. Our people have suffered heavy personal losses by losing their homes. Our parks' family is feeling a good deal of pain today."

At Cuyamaca, the historic Dyar house, which served also as the park headquarters and museum, was gutted by fire, only the stone walls left standing. A significant piece of San Diego County history was lost when Camp Hual-cu-Cuish was severely burned. Most camp buildings, including the historic mess hall, burned down. This camp was first developed by the California Conservation Corps (CCC) in the 1930's and actively used by local scouts until recently. Camp Hual-cu-Cuish represented one of the best examples of CCC era park rustic architecture in California. One campground, the Los Caballos horse camp, was destroyed. In addition, tens of thousands of acres of mixed forests of pine and Black Oak, grasslands, riparian corridors and animal habitat was seriously damaged.

"We have lost some of our most cherished cultural and historic resources," said Superintendent Fuzie. "It's like ripping a chapter from an American history book and burning it. We shall never see these places again. And we have lost wilderness areas where it will take decades before plant and animal species recover."

At Silverwood Lake State Recreation Area, the fire burned through nearly the entire park, more than 1,000 acres. A series of seven historic buildings used as park offices and storage structures were destroyed. Two boating campgrounds were destroyed. Several hundred picnic sites were leveled by flames. In addition, one State Park employee home was destroyed and two others were damaged. Also, hundreds of acres of mixed forest that was home to many animal species was destroyed.

Two other State Parks remain threatened by flames that are within striking distance if Santa Ana winds again cause a significant spread of the fires. Palomar Mountain State Park, located northeast of San Diego, is in the path of the Paradise fire. The other park, Santa Susana Pass State Historic Park, located near Chatsworth, is in the path of the Simi Fire. At both locations, State Parks' and other ground crews are working to clear brush around park structures and campgrounds to lessen the danger. The problem now is that with more Santa Ana winds forecast for next week, park crews are racing against the clock to get fire lines in place before those winds hit.

To save resources where possible, State Parks mobilized personnel from all across Northern California, forming teams that have been sent to the various fire locations. These teams include park superintendents for command and control, park rangers for peace officer duties, maintenance personnel, cultural and historic resources experts, natural resource and ecology experts, administration specialists and others. Also included are professional crisis counselors to help those who have suffered personal losses.

Because of the many fires burning in Southern California, a number of State Parks are now closed, either from damage, the threat of damage or heavy smoke in the area. Those parks include: Palomar Mountain State Park, Mt. San Jacinto State Park, Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, Silverwood Lake State Recreation Area, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, and San Pasqual Battlefield State Historic Park. Parks with severe damage will remain closed

indefinitely to allow for cleanup and rehabilitation. Others will remain closed until the fires are more fully contained and controlled or until it has been determined that the extreme fire danger has passed.

While the above parks are closed to the general public, the campground facilities at two parks, and only two, have been opened to evacuees, people who are fleeing the fire or have lost their homes and have no place else to go. These campgrounds are the Palm Canyon Campground, near Borrego Springs, at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, and the overnight campground at Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area, located just off State Highway 78. Please note that these campgrounds are most suitable for self-contained campers; persons needing actual shelter services will be better served in the Red Cross evacuation shelters.

At this point, parks employees have not been able to get back into many sections of Cuyamaca and Silverwood. Because of that, it is believed that once the true picture of the damage has been assessed, the damage toll will increase.

# # # #