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Firefighter dies in Calif. wildfires

By Andrew Bridges
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAKE ARROWHEAD, Calif. — In San Diego County, the state's largest fire claimed another victim when a firefighting crew was overcome by flames, killing one and injuring three. It marked the first firefighter death since the series of blazes began last week and brought the total number of dead to 18.

The hot, dry Santa Ana winds from the desert that had been whipping the fires into raging infernos eased, only to give way to stiff breezes off the ocean that pushed the flames up the canyon walls around evacuated resort towns like Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear, east of Los Angeles.

By early afternoon, homes were burning in the mountain community of CedarPines Park.

"There's fire on so many fronts, it's not even manageable at this point," said Chris Cade, a fire prevention technician with the U.S. Forest Service.

The fires have burned more than 620,000 acres and destroyed 1,800 homes. More than 12,000 firefighters and support crews were fighting what Gov. Gray Davis said may be the worst and costliest disaster California has ever faced.

The fires, which began last week, burned in a broken arc across Southern California, from Ventura County east to Los Angeles County and the San Bernardino Mountains and south to eastern San Diego County.

On Southern California's other major front, about 100 fire engines encircled the historic mining town of Julian in the mountains of eastern San Diego County, hoping to save the popular weekend getaway community renowned for its vineyards and apple orchards.

However, some two dozen engines and water tenders that were headed to Julian were forced to turn back when flames swept over a highway. And as the winds picked up, floating

embers sparked spot fires near the town of 3,500, forcing some crews to retreat.

South of Julian, about 90 percent of the homes were destroyed in Cuyamaca, a lakeside town about 160 residents.

"Everything's kind of happening all at once. These fires are trying really hard to tie in with each other," said Bill Bourbeau, a forest safety officer. "It's tremendous."

San Diego County fire officials feared a 233,000-acre fire and the 50,000-acre blaze would merge into a huge, single blaze that would make it nearly impossible to keep it from reaching Julian.

California Forest Department incident commander John Hawkins told exhausted firefighters not to give up.

"We hear losses," he said. "But the bottom line is we don't hear how many were saved. If many of you put your name on your body, your heart on the line to save the houses."

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