

Fallbrook fire victims angry, blame Marines for destruction

By Ozzie Roberts
Tribune Staff Writer

Clarence B. Wright was horrified as he watched his family's home and their 10-year-old plant nursery explode in flames before his eyes Tuesday.

Yesterday, the 56-year-old Fallbrook resident was angry at the Marines on nearby Camp Pendleton, saying that they were to blame for a brush fire that began on the military base and raged out of control for nearly three days, blackening 15,000 acres and destroying Wright's home and business.

His were the only structures burned in the fire.

A number of Wright's neighbors, whose homes were threatened by the wildfire (called variously the Roblar fire and the De Luz fire because of its proximity to De Luz Road in Fallbrook), joined Wright in pointing fingers at the military.

They say the fire began after military ordnance exploded on the base during training exercises early this week. And they say that if the explosives had not been fired while the area was experiencing extremely hot weather conditions, such an uncontrollable fire might not have ignited.

"They're always firing (explosive ordnances) over there and we can always see smoke from the fires that are set off by it," Wright said. "But why were they doing it with the weather conditions the way they've been the past few days?"

"The temperature was near 100 degrees almost every day and there was considerable wind. I wouldn't be surprised if this fire took off after one of those hot metal shells hit some brush . . .

"My house was insured but not my nursery. I'm going to have a new one put in, though, courtesy of the Marines."

Marine Corps officials admit that the fire began in a section of a 38,000-acre heavy munitions firing range located in the middle of the 125,000-acre base. But they say it is too soon to determine whether it was caused by an exploding shell.

"It's hard to say whether that fire was caused by spontaneous combustion or whether it was a fire that had been smoldering for more than a week," base spokesman Maj. Robert McLean said. "We have strict rules with respect to weather and possible fire conditions."

"We don't believe, at this time that we were firing irresponsibly. We tried to stop it (the fire) when we first realized it had begun, but like everyone else fighting fires around the county right now we became victims of unpredictable weather conditions."

He said the base fire chief has been ordered to conduct a full investigation and that base officials ask that anyone with damage claims from the Roblar fire contact the Marine Corps Judge Advocate's office by calling 725-5571.

McLean said the fire began shortly after 2 p.m. on Monday and, whipped by unpredictable winds in hot, dry weather, took off in two different directions.

On one of its paths the fire roared through Wright's property near the 3800 block of De Luz Road before being extinguished by dozens of firefighters at the front doorstep of a residence directly across the street.

"My property was where the firemen were going to make their stand," Wright said. "But the fire hit some flammables on the junkyard next door and jumped the grove of trees and plants and then started coming at us in two directions."

"Finally it created a whirlwind right in the middle of the nursery and that's when the 50 firefighters and I decided to get the hell out of there."

He said when the fire struck his house and an outdoor propane tank, the roof exploded and flames from the burning tank shot 200 feet into the air for about 30 minutes.

In addition to his house, he said seven greenhouses and an agriculture barn were also destroyed. He said he also lost tons of seeds and nearly 500,000 cactus and succulent plants he was growing.

He estimated his damages at more than \$300,000.

"It was like a tornado of fire," Wright said as he and several family members sifted through the rubble yesterday. "It turned over a 900-pound cart like it was nothing and melted everything in sight. I felt kind of groggy and stunned by it all."

Diane and Paul Nowothy, who live with their 4-year-old son, David, about a quarter-mile east of Wright on De Luz Road, said they spent the night watching another section of the fire roll over another hill toward their house.

"Oh, I was scared," Diane Nowothy said, "Because fire is something you can't control."

"We've just lived here a year and I was thinking that at any minute we wouldn't have a house. I don't ever want to go through that again."



Tribune photo by John Gibbins

CAT GETS A HELPING HAND

Wayne Bryan rescues a pet while fighting a fire in Lakeside

★Fires

Continued From Page 1

Fire officials also are worried that the worst could be ahead because of heavy brush in the back country grown tall and thick by winter rains.

"The fire season just started," another Department of Forestry spokesman said. "We usually have the worst of the season in the late summer or early fall when the Santa Ana winds hit us."

"We haven't had a Santa Ana yet, but it sure looks like it judging by what we've been through."

The "extreme fire danger caused the state agency to issue a proclamation yesterday suspending all burning on state land indefinitely, starting at 8 a.m. today."

Investigators have determined at least two of the fires — Deer Springs and Normal Heights — were set by human hands. They were still probing the cause of the other fires with the exception of the De Luz blaze, which began on Camp Pendleton after artillery practice on the base firing range.

The El Nopal fire, fueled by strong winds and high temperatures, started on a hill west of Escaderra Drive in Santee and moved eastward into Lakeside.

The fire was reported at 11:52 a.m.

No major injuries were reported but two Santee firefighters were treated for heat exhaustion after battling the blaze, which moved within 10 to 30 feet of a number of homes along Oak Creek and Palm Row drives.

Residents stood watching and waiting near cars loaded down with their belongings as others evacuated the scene with their horses and pets.

A new single-family housing development called Palm Paseo was also threatened for a time.

At the height of the fire, about 1 p.m., there were 20 engines and two

bulldozers, as well as two air tankers working to put out the fire.

Also on the scene were law enforcement agencies from Santee and the county Sheriff's Department.

Sheriff's deputies closed three roads leading into the fire area, Riverside Road, Riverford Road, and Oak Creek Road.

"I saw smoke at about 11:45 a.m. coming from Santee," said Joanne Whiteley. "By noon the smoke was over the hill coming toward my house."

She gathered her mule, pony, dog and goats and evacuated her home at 10806 Oak Creek Drive.

"The last fire we had here was in 1974, but it never came as close as our back yard," she said.

The largest concentration of firefighters and equipment remained on the De Luz fire today as forest service planes rained chemical retardant on the blaze some nine miles north of Fallbrook.

County animal control officers rounded up dozens of horses, cattle and other animals in the path of the fire.

"They did heroic work," one spokeswoman said. "Cats, dogs — a lot of people's pets — were saved by the actions of those officers."

Despite the weeklong onslaught, there were no deaths and only a few injuries to firefighters. Law enforcement officials reported two arrests: one a person in an unauthorized area near Normal Heights and a person drunk in public at the De Luz fire.

Dozens of people who had homes saved at the De Luz and Deer Springs fires credited the state forest service, which only two weeks ago warned them to clear brush from their residences.

Tribune staff writers John Furey, Elizabeth Wong and Kathie L. Taylor also contributed to this story.



Tribune photo by Joe Holly

EMERGENCY ROUNDUP

Lakeside residents rescue horses as brush fire nears