

Arsonist Sought in 5 of 7 Hillside Fires: FIRES: Arson Feared

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Arsonist Sought in 5 of 7 Hillside Fires

By ALAN MALTUN, *Times Staff Writer*

Arson was the probable cause of a wave of fires that blackened more than 60 acres in the San Raphael Mountains and Verdugo Hills in the past two weeks, investigators said.

Firefighters from Glendale and surrounding cities have battled seven brush fires since the fire season began Oct. 16. Fire Marshal Elmer Spraker said that three of the blazes probably were set by the same person. A similar incendiary device was used in each one.

The largest fire erupted early Wednesday near Cardigan Avenue and charred more than 50 acres of chaparral in the Verdugo Hills. Fifteen engine companies, two Los Angeles City helicopters and several dozen firefighters from Glendale, Burbank and Los Angeles

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County put it out. Two firemen suffered minor injuries, Spraker said.

Timing Is Crucial

"We have the weather with us," he said, "and the decision was made to make a hard, fast attack at night. Because of the steep terrain, if we hadn't knocked it down then, we'd still be up there."

Arson investigators believe the same person may have set two smaller fires Monday morning near Idylwood Drive above Brand Park. It threatened an area of expensive homes, Spraker said.

The fires burned about five acres of brush before being controlled. One home was slightly damaged, he said, but no injuries were reported.

A third blaze occurred Monday on Day Street in La Crescenta only about 15 minutes after the first two, Spraker said. Investigators suspect arson in those fires, but found no incendiary devices.

On Oct. 16, three fires darkened about seven acres in Chevy Chase Canyon in the San Raphael Mountains, Spraker said. No injuries were reported and there was no structural damage, but arson is suspected in that blaze as well.

Investigations Continuing

Spraker said all the fires occurred adjacent to paved roads except the Cardigan fire, which began near a well-traveled lovers' lane. He said investigations are continuing, and one suspect was arrested in the Cardigan fire but released. No suspects are in custody.

The foothill cities of Pasadena, Glendale and Burbank have now closed remote areas to hikers and horseback riders, and vehicles have been barred from unpaved roads, Spraker said.

"The fire situation is very explosive now," he said. "The native chaparral is in its grease stage, which means it survives on its own 'grease.' That's why you see black smoke from some brush fires. Essentially now there is no moisture in the fuel (brush)."

Spraker said the signs of the fire season are here—dryness accompanied by occasional Santa Ana winds and heat. "We've had this inversion layer here for so long it's kind of holding it off," he said, "but we are into the fire season right now."