Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name:	**Incident Date & Time:**
Laguna Fire	09/26/1970 @ 06:15
Location: Cleveland National Forest, Descanso Ranger District, near Mount Laguna, California	**Incident Size:** 175,425 acres
Types of resources involved: 70 different fire departments and agencies 1800 total personal from start to finish	**# of Fatalities/injuries:** 8 civilian fatalities confirmed Other reports of 16 civilian fatalities

Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:

- Fire made a notable impact within the wildland fire service
- Civilian mass casualty event

Conditions leading up to the event:

In the Fall of 1970, California firefighters were on edge. Southern California had experienced little to no rain compared to previous years. In mid-September, the relative humidity would average from the teens to the single digits and temperatures were averaging in the 90's. There had already been two brief periods of Santa Ana wind conditions during the month. A third event had the strongest winds which led to the Laguna Fire.

Regarding the rest of California during the month of September. Fires were starting to pop off throughout the state with fire sizes ranging from several acres to well over 300 acres. With the number of fires growing daily, the availability of resources was shrinking just as quickly.

Brief description of the event:

The Laguna Fire started on September 26, at approximately 06:15 in the Laguna Mountains near the intersection of the Sunrise Highway and Kitchen Creek Road. The fire was caused by an oak tree falling on powerlines in the powerful Santa Ana winds. Two hunters nearby spotted the fire and reported it to Forest Service employees in the area. After repeated attempts, these Forest Service personnel were able to contact the Los Pinos Lookout tower on the Descanso Ranger District and have them notify all district personnel and advise Forest Dispatch of the fire. Los Pinos Lookout picked up the smoke developing at approximately 06:28.

At 06:42, the first size up of the fire was reported to be less than a half an acre, burning in timber on an east facing slope, and spreading rapidly in a southwesterly direction with east winds blowing 40-50 mph. Only a few minutes later at 06:50, due to the fuel conditions, weather, and surrounding topography, the fire had grown to 40 acres in size and was beginning to spot ahead of itself.

Air support, additional manpower and heavy equipment were ordered, but with the multiple fires going on at the time in Southern California, no handcrews were available. Resources were hard to come by for a strong initial attack. With fixed wing retardant drops being unsuccessful due to the high wind speeds, air support was grounded. The Santa Ana winds were averaging 50 mph on the ground, and Los Pinos Lookout reported winds up to 100 mph the first day. With these conditions, the fire had an estimated rate of spread of 3,000 acres per hour for the first 48 hours. Firefighters and available heavy equipment did their best to flank and contain the fire. Even with more resources and equipment starting to trickle in daily, it wasn't until after the Santa Ana winds dissipated that they were able to contain the fire, on October 4.

The fire consumed the communities of Harbison Canyon and Crest, up to 30 miles west of the point of origin. In the end, the fire burned 175,425 acres and 382 homes, killing 8 civilians with some reports of 16 civilian fatalities.

Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

Strong Santa Ana winds with reports of up to 100 mph.
Fuel moisture critically low.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

The *Laguna Fire Report* suggested reevaluating procedures for the identification of diseased and high-risk trees near powerlines. (page 31 of the report in the Prevention section)

The additional civilian fatalities were later determined to be undocumented immigrants using brush fields for cover from border authorities. The Laguna Fire is not the only case of this happening along the US/Mexico border. Suppression operations in these areas should take into account such past events and work closely with border authorities regarding the location of known “trails” next to or within the fire perimeter.

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Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:
Congress created FIRESCOPE: *Firefighting Resources of Southern California Organized for Potential Emergencies*, in response to concerns raised by disastrous Southern California wildfires in 1970. FIRESCOPE is directed towards improving the effectiveness and cooperation of fire services in response to a major incident. A major component of the program was development of the Incident Command System (ICS), which was adopted the federal wildland fire service. Later the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) adopted ICS nationally for the management of all their emergency activities. Congress also directed the establishment of the Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System (MAFFS) which would allow military transport aircraft to respond to wildfires if the commercial air tankers are unavailable or committed elsewhere. This fire was one of the first documented uses of the Canadian based "scooper aircraft" (Canadair CL-215) in support of wildfires in the United States. The aircraft and crew were provided by Canadair Ltd and worked the fire around the El Capitan Reservoir. The issues surrounding the entire multiagency response limited the aircraft's effectiveness and none of the "Canadair CL series" was used again in Southern California until the Lytle Fire on the San Bernadino National Forest in 2013. These aircraft are the forerunners of the Canadair CL-415 which are on contract in Southern California currently.
Links to more information on this incident:
https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/laguna-fire-analysis-1970 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laguna_Fire https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/FIRESCOPE https://wildfiretoday.com/2009/09/26/laguna-fire-september-26-1970/ https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/local-history/story/2020-09-28/from-the-archives-laguna-fire-50-years-ago-1970 Video: ➢ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJuU8SiEjZ8&t=1s

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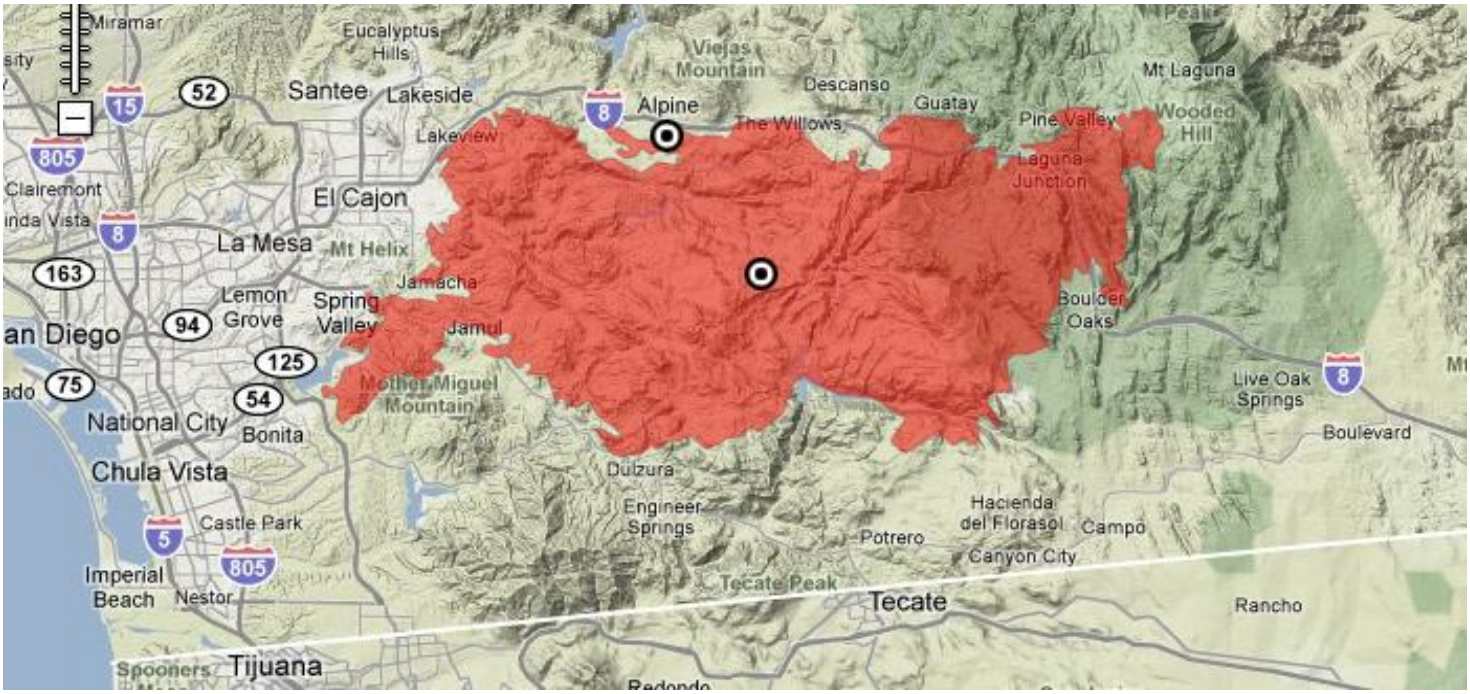

Final perimeter of the Laguna Fire

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