

Fires outside L.A. threaten homes, spare Reagan library

By **BRIAN MELLEY**
AND MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ
Associated Press

SIMI VALLEY, Calif. — A wind-whipped outbreak of wildfires outside Los Angeles on Wednesday threatened thousands of homes and horse ranches, forced the smoky evacuation of elderly patients in wheelchairs and narrowly bypassed the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, protected in part by a buffer zone chewed by goats.

With California tinder dry and fires burning in both the north and south, the state was at the mercy of gusty winds, on high alert for any new flames that could run wild, and weary from intentional blackouts aimed at preventing power lines from sparking more destruction.

The blaze near the Reagan library in Simi Valley was driven by strong Santa Ana winds that are the bane of Southern California in the fall and have historically fanned the most destructive fires in the region.

The cause was not yet determined, but Southern California Edison filed a report with state regulators to say it began near its power lines. Electrical equipment has sparked some of California's worst wildfires in recent years and prompted utilities to resort to precautionary



Marco Alcaraz uses a garden hose to protect his girlfriend's home as the Easy fire approaches Wednesday in Simi Valley, Calif.

power outages. SoCal Edison had not cut power in the area at the time this fire started.

The library, which holds the presidential archives and whose grounds include the graves of Reagan and his wife, Nancy, was well-equipped when flames surrounded it. It relies on a combination of high-tech defenses, such as fireproof vaults and a low-tech measure taken every year, when hundreds of goats are brought in to feed on the brush and create a firebreak.

An army of firefight-

ers helped protect the hill-top museum, and helicopters hit the flames, leaving some neighbors resentful as they frantically hosed down fires in the surrounding subdivisions and open ranchland.

Armed with just a garden hose and wearing a mask, Beth Rivera watered down the perimeter of her large home to prevent embers from igniting dry grass and trees. Friends helped evacuate 11 horses from the property. Soaring flames were only 30 yards away and blowing toward her house, with no

firetrucks in sight.

Animals could be heard shrieking in a barn burning next door on Tierra Rejada Road, where large ranches with riding stables and horse rings line the road. Two horses bolted into the street from the flaming barn, trailing a cloud of smoke.

“Oh gosh, this isn’t fun,” Rivera said. “There isn’t a fire unit (here) at the moment because they’re busy working on the fire close to the library. This is why I’m very worried. Because I can’t ... save my home.”

After killing, GOP skeptics still doubt foreign policy

By **JILL COLVIN AND STEVE PEOPLES**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Few moments have provoked such widespread condemnation of President Donald Trump from fellow Republicans as his sudden decision this month to withdraw most U.S. troops from Syria.

But if Trump hoped to win a reprieve from GOP skeptics after the raid that resulted in the death of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he may be disappointed.

Sue Wehnert said she shakes her head “in disbelief” at Trump’s handling of world affairs, including the Syria withdrawal. The 57-year old Republican, who lives in Annapolis, Maryland, voted for Trump in 2016 and has no regrets. But she doesn’t buy the president’s argument that the al-Baghdadi mission validates his unconventional approach to foreign policy and national security.

“Pulling the troops out was not part of a strategic ploy to divert attention enabling us to raid the compound” of al-Baghdadi, she said.

As he faces a growing impeachment threat and a heated battle for re-election next year, it’s important for Trump to keep voters like Wehnert in his column. But other Republicans and Trump backers said they were also trying to make sense of the dizzying developments overseas.

John Brandte, an attorney from Concord, New Hampshire, who voted for Trump in 2016, agrees with the president’s view that the U.S. shouldn’t serve as the world’s police force, and he wanted to see troops withdrawn from Syria. But he nonetheless found Trump’s moves “a surprise” and questioned the timing. He struggled to square his reservations about the withdrawal with the news with al-Baghdadi’s death.

“We have the apparently abrupt troop pullout from Syria, but then we have the head bad guy being taken out, and Trump was absolutely part of it, part of the whole process,” Brandte said.

Philip Zelikow, a registered Republican who served in every administration from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, including as deputy to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and director of the 9/11 Commission, said he doesn’t identify with Trump’s GOP. He said he had no confidence in Trump before al-Baghdadi’s death and has none now.

“There’s no judgment there. There’s no analysis. It’s simply what’s the posture I need to strike on TV today that makes me look good,” he said of Trump’s approach to foreign policy. “A boat that has no rudder will occasionally drift into the right course.”

Ironically, some of the Republicans who are cheering Trump the loudest are those who have most vocally opposed him in the past.

Census Bureau to fight misinformation

By **AMANDA SEITZ AND RACHEL LERMAN**
Associated Press

CHICAGO — Worried about internet trolls and foreign powers spreading false news, census officials are preparing to battle misinformation campaigns for the first time in the count’s 230-year history.

The stakes are huge. Who participates in the 2020 census count could influence how U.S. congressional seats and billions of federal tax dollars to educate children, help low-income families and pave new roads are divvied up.

“It’s a fine target,” former U.S. Census Bureau director John Thompson said of the form, which is sent every decade to households in America to count the population. “If you want to disrupt a democracy, you can certainly go about it by disrupting a census.”

Already, false and inaccurate social media posts about the census have begun to appear online, where they have been viewed thousands of times. Foremost on everyone’s mind are the misinformation wars waged during the last presidential election to confuse U.S. voters.

Fake posts about the census began popping up days after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June that the Trump administration could not ask about citizenship status on the 2020 census: Conservative bloggers, Twitter users and pundits falsely blamed former President Barack Obama for scrubbing the question from the form in 2010. In fact, the main census form hasn’t included a citizen-



Immigration activists rally outside the Supreme Court as the justices hear arguments over the Trump administration's plan to ask about citizenship on the 2020 Census in Washington.

ship question since 1950, and the bureau’s own analysis found it would discourage people from participating, possibly skewing results.

And last month, sham posts popped up warning online neighborhood chat groups that robbers were scamming their way into people’s homes by asking to check residents’ identification for the upcoming census. The online hoax left Census Bureau officials scrambling to get the post removed from Facebook, concerned that census workers who were knocking on doors to verify addresses could face trouble.

Cyber and census experts worry that trolls and foreign governments will sow more confusion to discourage people from participating in the census, either for political reasons or to game the allocation of resources.

Their main targets? Major U.S. internet platforms, such as Google, Twitter and Facebook, according to Dipayan

Within minutes, a fire crew arrived to help Rivera and her boyfriend protect their home.

The brush fire broke out before dawn between the cities of Simi Valley and Moorpark north of Los Angeles and exploded to more than 1,300 acres, Ventura County officials said. About 7,000 homes, or around 26,000 people, were ordered evacuated, authorities said.

Wind gusts up to 68 mph were reported in the area, forecasters said. Other spots in Southern California were buffeted by even stronger winds. The gusts knocked over a truck on a freeway in Fontana.

Another wildfire forced the evacuation of two mobile home parks and a health care facility in Jurupa Valley, 45 miles east of Los Angeles, where elderly people were taken out in wheelchairs and gurneys as smoke swirled overhead. The blaze was at least 200 acres in size.

Meanwhile, nearly 1 million people who rely on Pacific Gas & Electric were without power across Northern California amid the third blackout in a week imposed by the state’s largest utility.

In wine country north of San Francisco, fire officials reported progress in their battle against a 120-square-mile blaze in Sonoma County, saying it was 30% contained.

The fire destroyed at least 206 structures, including 94 homes, and threatened 90,000 more, most of them homes, authorities said. More than 150,000 people were under evacuation orders.

Winds topped out at 70 mph north of San Francisco Bay and began to ease early Wednesday, but forecasters said the fire danger would remain high because of continuing breezes and dry air.

In Southern California, fire crews continued trying to snuff out a wildfire in the celebrity-studded hills of Los Angeles that destroyed a dozen homes on Monday. About 9,000 people, including Arnold Schwarzenegger and LeBron James, were ordered to evacuate.

No deaths have been reported from the recent fires, but toppled trees claimed three lives.

In the battle taking place in the dry hills around Simi Valley, 800 firefighters worked on the ground as helicopters precisely dropped water on the leading edge of the flames and a jet streamed red fire retardant to slow the fire’s growth.

Firefighters successfully protected the library, leaving it looking like an island in a soot-black sea. Flames came within about 30 yards of the property, but there was no damage, library spokeswoman Melissa Giller said.

As a first line of defense, census officials have spent months forging relationships with dozens of technology companies that keep close guard on their massive datasets and proprietary information.

The bureau now works directly with all major platforms — Facebook, Twitter and Google — to help inform people about the mechanics of the census and to stamp out inaccurate information that’s swirling around.

“We can communicate with them quickly and try to resolve, whether it’s on public forums or in closed groups,” said Zack Schwartz, the deputy division chief for the Census Bureau’s Center for New Media & Promotion.

Both Facebook and Google have told The Associated Press they will set up teams dedicated to stopping misinformation about the census.

Facebook will use a mix of people and artificial intelligence to spot, review and remove troublesome posts. CEO Mark Zuckerberg told Congress on Wednesday that the company would soon release a new census policy similar to its election rules, which prohibit false content about voting hours, location and registration on its site.

“We recognize this is important and this rises above normal hoaxes or misinformation,” Zuckerberg said.

Similarly, Twitter will use artificial intelligence and employees to spot and remove misleading posts about the census. It will also rely on users to report census misinformation.



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