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Firefighters stop July 4 blaze

Neal Ross | Sonoma Valley SUN

A swift-moving grass fire swept up a Lomita Avenue hillside north of Sonoma July 4, throwing thick columns of dirty white smoke into the Independence Day sky but causing no injuries or damage.

The fire, which was contained by 3 p.m. and under control by 11 p.m., broke out shortly before 1:45 p.m. as a prevention-minded local resident was mowing high grass along the avenue's north side in an effort at reducing fire danger.

"He had good intentions," Mark Freeman, a division chief with the Sonoma Valley Fire and Rescue Authority, said Tuesday.

Engines, water tenders and crews from four Valley agencies – SVFRA and the Glen Ellen, Kenwood and Schell-Vista fire departments – were the first to arrive on scene, eventually aided by more than a half-dozen others: Rincon Valley, Bennett Valley, Gold Ridge (near Sebastopol), Rancho Adobe (Penngrove) and Santa Rosa.

In addition, the 18 "local resource engines" were aided by a larger-than-standard Cal Fire response of five engines, two hand crews, two bulldozers, two helicopters, four Grumman S-2T air tankers and an OV-10A Bronco "air attack" plane, said Cal Fire Capt. Jeff Gahagan.

The flames blackened the grass on an oak-dotted hill roughly 400 feet tall, standing out from the ridge which separates Lomita Avenue from Norrbom Road. Those not immediately responding to the scene staged at the Sonoma Valley Fire and Rescue Authority's main firehouse on Second Street West.

Some units were initially directed to Norrbom Road and nearby Michael Drive for structure protection, but Freeman said that later proved unnecessary.

"There was not a threat in either of those two locations," Freeman said. "The fire was contained to seven acres."

As ground-based firefighters struggled to encircle the hill with engines and hoses, the helicopters dropped bucket after bucket of water before spiraling off for a refill. Air tankers released three loads of thick firefighting "slurry" which unfolded like a pinkish-orange ribbon in the afternoon sunlight.

"The trees all around the house were on fire, so I threw a load right on the house," tanker pilot Bob Valette said Tuesday. "It put out the fire, but the house is a passionate pink right now."

Smoke could be seen from south of Sonoma Plaza, where crowds celebrating the Fourth of July festivities – as well as knots of sidewalk onlookers throughout Sonoma – gathered to watch the west-streaming cloud, which began dissipating around 2:45 p.m.

Friday's blaze was just a small taste of the conditions around the state, where more than 300 fires were still raging by Tuesday afternoon and being slowly contained by 18,415 firefighters. At least a baker's dozen of those fighting those farflung fires are from Sonoma Valley, and most of them are committed to fires in Butte County that were caused by lightning strikes on June 21. They are:

Kenwood fire Capt. Daren Bellach, who's been undergoing strike-team leader training for the past week and is expected back home this week;

Schell-Vista firefighters Jamal Cook, Bruno Webber, Austin Boldt, Jeremy Biggs;

SVFRA fire Capts. Mike Bruno and Sean Lacy and firefighters Bill Harper, Bob Molesworth, Jack Ayres, Ben Gulson and Ryan McCracken. The latter crew includes Glen Ellen firefighter Kristin Nightingale.

In addition, SVFRA Division Chief Bob Norrbom was expected at press time to return July 9 from 12 days on the fire lines.