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Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune

Hoses snake through blackened manzanita and across a Lovall Valley Road hilltop in the wake of Tuesday's 10-acre wildland fire. Flames shot up 70 feet into the afternoon sky.

pic2

Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune

Firefighters labor through dense Trinity Road brush to extinguish Tuesday morning's three-acre burn.

Fires scorch Valley

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By Neal Ross

High winds, low humidity and sparks from a pair of control burns added up to two wildfires Tuesday, as 13 acres -- but no homes -- burned on Trinity and Lovall Valley roads.

"Any time the warming trend starts, and the wind, it's probably a good idea to get a heads-up and anticipate what the future might bring in the next couple of months," said county battalion chief Tom Somermeier.

Battalion Chief Roy Sprague, of the California Department of Forestry, said that although early-spring wildland fires are uncommon, "what really surprised me was how we had fires with this intensity."

"To have this heavy rainy spell, and go to this kind of fire ... it just shows you what this kind of wind can do with this kind of fuel," Sprague said.

The first blaze broke out around 10:15 a.m., at 3141 Trinity Road, apparently from some logs that had been cut and burned a few days earlier but were still smoldering on Tuesday.

A 50-mph, dry north wind whipped up sparks which blew into and ignited adjacent trees. Fanned by the breeze, the flames traveled downhill, "spotting" (lighting smaller fires) ahead of the main burn -- which turned and raced up a canyon.

"(The homeowners) had concluded their burning several days before that, and had no intention of burning in those conditions," Sprague said yesterday. "But four or five days ago, how could you tell that we'd have those conditions?"

Ash fell like snow and clouds of dirty brown smoke drifted west toward Sonoma Mountain, as some 88 firefighters and 16 pieces of equipment converged on the scene from every Valley department as well as many throughout the county. Units were summoned from Sebastopol, Santa Rosa, Petaluma, Windsor, and the Rincon Valley, Rancho Adobe and Gold Ridge fire districts. CDF contributed four engines, and automatic aid was also summoned from Napa County.

"It's a crazy fire," said an off-duty CDF crewman who was preparing to help his shouting colleagues battle a spot-fire just off the roadway. "It's jumping every which way."

Two CDF hand crews -- some 40 prisoners from the department's Delta Camp -- were also pressed into service clearing scorched brush and cutting firebreaks.

No structures were lost, although the three-acre blaze raged within 20 feet of two houses at the top and bottom of the canyon. Sheriff's helicopter Henry-1 filled its drop bucket at the upper home's swimming pool, dumping load after watery load to contain the fire.

One firefighter, Mayacamas fire Capt. Michael Hudson -- who had reportedly been "working his tail off" with the first-in engine crew -- suffered a heart attack and was taken to Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital. Yesterday morning, Hudson said he was looking forward to being released later in the day.

"It's go home, take medication and take care of yourself, (and) lose some weight," Hudson said with a chuckle.

By noon, most of the smoke was dissipating, and clusters of steam-wrapped firefighters concentrated on mopping up "hot spots." Henry-1 cleared the scene shortly after 1 p.m. to help out with another grassfire near Occidental, and a few engines started leaving around 1:30 p.m.

But just before 3 p.m., fire alarms rang again as a control burn escaped from the Versaggi property at 3144 Lovall Valley Road near Wood Valley Road.

Flames 70 feet high -- visible from Sonoma Plaza -- danced on the hilltop as Sonoma and Schell-Vista engines raced to the scene, with some cutting around to attack the fire on the hill's Old Winery Road side. Thick columns of brown and white smoke, laced with occasional black threads, boiled into the late-afternoon sky.

More than a dozen units -- Valley, county and CDF -- sped from their mopping-up operations on Trinity Road, with some seven engines, two water tenders and four CDF hand-crews entering the fray.

As before, wind and dense scrub fed the fires. One spot flared into a 10-foot sheet within two seconds, as a downwind hose-crew struggled to quench the blaze.

Henry-1 dropped bucketsful of water on the manzanita-thick hillside, keeping the flames from approaching the Versaggi house and containing the blaze's downhill, wind-pushed spread.

Although the fire was largely contained within two hours, CDF crews were still keeping an eye on the scene Wednesday afternoon.

CDF battalion chief Sprague said yesterday that it hadn't yet been decided whether or not the Versaggis would be cited for the fire, or billed for suppression. He declined to estimate the cost.

"It's cheaper than it would have been if we were flying (tanker) airplanes," he said.

Assistant Schell-Vista fire Chief Ray Mulas praised the helicopter crew, adding that the Lovall Valley area has been a potential fire hazard for some time.

"We've been telling guys for years that that place is dangerous," Mulas said. "And what's going to happen when it's 100 degrees out and you're trying to get up there?"