

At least 10 dead in California wine country wildfire, thousands affected

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San Francisco: Wildfires whipped by powerful winds swept through California wine country on Monday, killing at least 10 people, destroying 1,500 homes and businesses and sending thousands fleeing as flames raged unchecked through high-end resorts, grocery stores and tree-lined neighborhoods.

Smoke rises as wildfire burns near Kenzo Estate in Napa, California on Monday

As he fled through the ember-strewn streets of his neighborhood in Santa Rosa, Jeff Okrepkie knew it was probably the last time he would see his home of the past five years standing.

His worst fears were confirmed on Monday morning, when a friend sent him a photo of what was left: a smoldering heap of burnt metal and debris.

“We live in the valley, where it’s concrete and strip malls and hotels and supermarkets,” Okrepkie said. “The last thing you think is a forest fire is going to come and wipe us out.”

At least 10 people died and two were seriously injured in the blazes that started on Sunday, fire officials said.

The flames were burning “at explosive rates” because of 50 mph winds, said Ken Pimlott, director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Firefighter sprays water on a home as he battles flames from a wildfire Monday in Napa

Fourteen large fires were burning, spread over a 200-mile region north of San Francisco from Napa in the south to Redding in the north. Gov. Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency in Napa, Sonoma and Yuba counties.

It was unusual to have so many fires take off at the same time, fire officials said, though October has generally been the most destructive time of year for California wildfires.

The ferocity of the flames forced authorities to focus primarily on getting people out safely, even if it meant abandoning structures to the fire. The fire area covered more than 100 square miles (160 square kilometers) over eight counties.

Elsewhere in the state, a fire churning through canyons in hilly neighborhoods of Orange County burned multiple homes and forced residents of about 1,000 homes to evacuate.

Fire burns at a Hilton hotel on Monday in Santa Rosa, California

Some of the largest blazes were in Napa and Sonoma counties, home to dozens of wineries that attract tourists from around the world. They sent smoke as far south as San Francisco, about 60 miles (96 kilometers) away. What caused

the blazes was not known.

Fires also burned in Yuba, Butte and Nevada counties â€” all north of the state capital.

The inferno blackened miles along one of the main gateways into wine country, State Highway 12 into Sonoma County. Wooden fence posts and guard rails burned fiercely. Thick smoke roiled from one winery, JR Cohn.

The fires also damaged the Silverado Resort in Napa and a Hilton hotel in Santa Rosa, the largest city in the fire area, with a population of about 175,000.

Kim Hoe, a 33-year-old tech worker from Penang, Malaysia, was staying at the Hilton Sonoma Wine Country, which was gutted by flames. He said the power went out around 1 a.m., and he and his colleagues started packing up when someone knocked on the door and told them to run.

â€œWe just had to run and run. It was full of smoke. We could barely breathe. It was dangerous,â€• Hoe said.

Smoke rises as wildfire burns in the hills north east of Napa, California on Monday

They returned in the morning to find the hotel had been destroyed along with most of their possessions. Hoe was relieved he had taken his passport and a few essential items.

Santa Rosa lost a Kmart, restaurants and an unknown number of businesses and homes. The blaze shut down schools and forced more than 200 patients at two city hospitals to evacuate.

Firefighters rushed to a state home for the severely disabled when flames reached one side of the centerâ€™s sprawling campus in the historic Sonoma County town of Glen Ellen. Emergency workers leapt from their cars to aid in the evacuation. Crews got the more than 200 patients from the threatened buildings, one firefighter said, as flames closed within a few dozen feet.

Residents throughout the area described a headlong flight to safety through smoke and flames.

Mike Turpen, 38, was at a bar in Glen Ellen early Monday when a stranger wearing a smoke mask ran in and yelled that there was a fire. Turpen raced home through flames in his Ford F-250.

Firemen look for hot spots in the Fountain grove area of Santa Rosa, California on Monday

â€œIt was like Armageddon was on,â€• Turpen said. â€œEvery branch of every tree was on fire.â€•

He woke later to find all his neighborsâ€™ homes on fire, but stayed behind to try to defend his own rental home.

By late morning, Turpen, wearing shorts, a kerchief mask and goggles, was the last man standing for miles along one abandoned road. His yard and all those around him were burned, smoking and still flaming in a few spots. But his home was still standing.

- AP