

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Esperanza Fire	Incident Date & Time: 10/26/2006 @ 07:00
Incident Location: Southeast of Cabazon, California in the Twin Pines Ranch subdivision east of Highway 243	Incident Size: Less than 4,000 acres at time of burnover 41,000 acres final size
Types of resources involved: US Forest Service engine crew	# of Fatalities/injuries: 5 fatalities
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire made a notable impact within the wildland fire service ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>Cabazon, California sits in a valley between Mount San Jacinto to the south and San Gorgonio Mountain to the north. These features combine to regularly funnel strong winds (both diurnal and Santa Ana patterns) through the area. The Esperanza Fire burned south of Cabazon on the slope at the base of Mount San Jacinto. This slope has a very high fire occurrence as evidenced by the light fuels in the area instead of more typical heavy fuels found on a north aspect. The fire history for the area includes a significant level of arson activity. Fatalities are also a part of that history, the Bailiff Fire of 1967, the Mack II of 1971, and the Edna Fire of 1998 together claimed the lives of two firefighters and an S-2 airtanker pilot.</p> <p>The Esperanza Fire was first reported at 01:11 on October 26, 2006. Red Flag conditions were widely predicted the previous day. However, the expected Santa Ana winds had not yet surfaced when the fire was reported that morning. The fire started in the jurisdiction of Cal-Fire and they requested mutual aid from the US Forest Service early in the fire's progression. Cal-Fire requested a pre-planned response of five Type III fire engines from the San Bernardino National Forest. As a result of the request, fire engines E51, E52, E54, E56, and E57 to respond to the Incident Command Post (ICP) in Cabazon, California. There were numerous other fire units arriving and staging at ICP throughout the early morning. The five San Bernardino National Forest engines arrived at the ICP at about 0400 that morning. Esperanza Operations assigned all five engines to Branch II located in the Twin Pines area off Highway 243 and the engines departed ICP by 04:20.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>En route to their assignment in Branch II, E51 was diverted to a new incident for initial attack. The remaining 4 engines continued with their original assignment and reached the Staging Area at the intersection of Twin Pines Road and Highway 243 at about 04:50. The road was heavily congested with fire apparatus. Public evacuations were also in progress, which added to the confusion. To reduce congestion, E52 and E57 moved down Twin Pines Road followed later by E54, leaving E56 at the intersection. During this movement they encountered Branch II. In their initial tactical briefing, Branch II relayed to Captain 57 and Captain 52 the need to assist with evacuations and structure triage along Wonderview Road, but to contact Structure Group to confirm the assignment. Captain 57 radioed back to E56, who was still at the intersection, and instructed them to link up with Structure Group to confirm the assignment. Captain 56 checked in with Structure Group and confirmed the assignment and radio frequencies. Then E56 then moved up to re-join the other three engines further in on Twin Pines Road.</p> <p>At 05:15, E52 and E57 began to move toward their assignment down Wonderview Road. E56 and E54 remained behind and were contacted by Structure Group and told that another engine, March BR10, was being attached to them. E54 inquired about getting a Strike Team Leader to assist with scouting, but there was none available. Both E56 and E54 waited along Twin Pines Road for March BR10 to meet them. Once these three engines were linked up, they began to move toward Wonderview Road trying to follow behind E52 & E57. However, several groups of large structure engines leaving the area caused congestion and eventually the Structure Group and Branch II re-directed E54, E56 and March BR10 to a new assignment on Gorgonio View Road. En route back out Twin Pines Road, this group of engines encountered E51 that had just arrived on-scene after being released from their earlier initial attack assignment. With E51 now added in, the four engines headed to their new assignment down Gorgonio View Road at 05:50. They were directed to a structure down Gorgonio View Road that Branch II wanted the engines to defend and indicated that it was safe. As the four engines started down they got the first glimpse of the fire down slope. In the darkness it appeared that they were driving into a "bowl." This caused some concern as the road was very narrow and rough, crewmembers on two different engines voiced some reservations about continuing with the assignment.</p> <p>As those four engines were re-locating to their new assignment, E57 and E52 were assessing structures and assisting with evacuations down Wonderview Road. At 05:45, E52 arrived at structure that became known as the "Tile House" and set up to defend it. E57 continued down Wonderview Road and by about 06:00, had arrived at the intersection of Wonderview Road and Gorgonio View Road. From there, E57 turned onto Gorgonio View Road and immediately arrived at what became known as the "Octagon House." The structure had good building materials and clearance, so Captain 57 decided it was defensible and the crew started setting up a portable pump in the pool and laying hose around the house and the garage.</p>	

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At about 06:20, E51, E54, E56 and March Brush 10 arrived at their assigned structure which became known as the “Double-wide.” The property had a number of problems: kennels with many barking dogs, several agitated horses in a corral, vehicles scattered about, and a large pole barn filled with Manzanita branches and other unknown items. After confirming the assignment with Branch II, Captain 54 took charge and directed the crews to move vehicles, position engines, establish hoselays, and cut vegetation to prepare for a firing operation. At the same time, Captain 51 and 56 scouted the area and made radio contact with Captain 57 at Octagon House. They determined that a firing operation at the Double-wide would not adversely affect E57 at the Octagon House.

Between 06:30 and 06:45 the fire began to make several strong runs, one burned around the Tile House. As one of these runs began to run upslope south of the Double-wide the crews successfully fired around the compound and held it under extremely smoky conditions. At this time Captain 56 received a call from Captain 57 asking for assistance at the Octagon House. Captain 56 replied that it would be a while before they could send anyone due to the increased fire activity. Sometime around 07:00 another run developed north of the Double-wide that caused the Captains to pull their crews back to the engines while it passed by. At one point, Captain 52, standing at north edge of Tile House saw a glow against some rock outcroppings slightly downslope of Octagon House and minutes later the fire completely enveloped the entire area from the rock outcroppings up and over the Octagon House. Captain 52 estimated this happened in less than 10 seconds. Captain 52 described the fire behavior as “*area ignition with no perceivable rate of spread, the entire area looked like a churning cauldron.*” The E57 crew was burned over at the Octagon House as a result of this fire run from the north. Several attempts to re-establish radio contact with E57 around 07:15 were unsuccessful. Initial attempts by the other engine crews to access the Octagon House were repelled by heat and smoke. By 08:00 several of the Captains were able to make their way, on foot, to E57’s position and found the crew. Daniel Hoover-Najera, Jess Mclean, and Jason McKay were found deceased on-scene. Pablo Cerda and Captain Mark Loutzenhiser were transported by helicopter to a burn center where they later died.

The fire, later determined to have been started by an arsonist, burned in excess of 41,000 acres. In addition to the Engine 57 tragedy, the fire destroyed a total of 34 residences and 20 outbuildings.

Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

Surfacing Santa Ana winds.
Steep terrain with features that created a channeling effect.
Wind and terrain in alignment.
Light flashy fuels as the result of a very active fire history.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Engine task groups or strike teams should have a “recon” vehicle available to assist in lookout/scouting actions in order to know what the fire is doing especially in unfamiliar areas or country not seen in daylight.
Dealing with the pressure of local expectations to engage in high risk structure defense situations.
Expect communication disparities and difficulties between different agency resources in an emerging fire situation.

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

Post fire accident prevention plan identified the need to update the National Wildfire Coordinating Group training course *S-215 Fire Operations in the Wildland Urban Interface*.
Post fire accident prevention plan called for the US Forest Service to review their wildfire suppression policy to enhance agency-wide performance and determine key factors to make educated risk decisions when operational assets are committed or proposed to be committed in the wildland urban interface.
First fatality incident in which an Incident Management Team (Type 1) was mobilized specifically to organize the Family Support actions, the Memorial Service, and provide post incident support to a local unit.
Catalyst for the development of the *You Will Not Stand Alone* course in the wildland fire service.

Links to more information on this incident:

https://wildfiretoday.com/documents/Esperanza_Factual_Report.pdf
https://wildfiretoday.com/?s=esperanza&monthnum=&year=&states_provinces=&countries=&topics=
<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/2006/10/26/esperanza-fire-entrapment/>
<http://www.coloradofirecamp.com/esperanza/index.htm>
<https://www.firehouse.com/safety-health/article/12127755/nfff-new-goals-firefighter-safety-in-the-wildland-interface-esperanza-fire>

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Book:

- *The Esperanza Fire: Arson, Murder, and the Agony of Engine 57* ~ by John Maclean

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center offers an excellent site which provides information on many wildland incidents.

[Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's Incident Review Database \(IRDB\) \(wildfire.gov\)](https://www.wildfire.gov/wildfire-lessons-learned-center/incident-review-database)

This summary page was proudly provided by:

Jim Cook & Kurt La Rue

September 2023



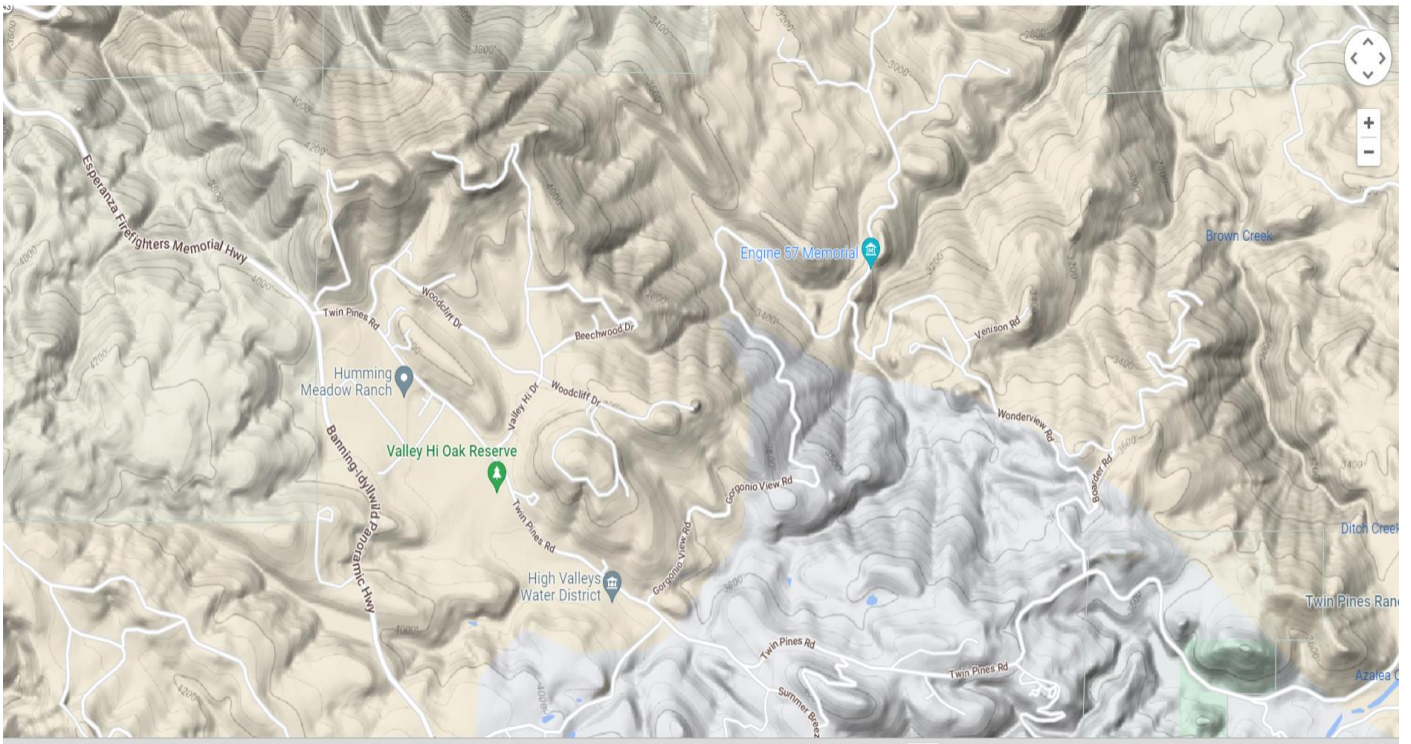
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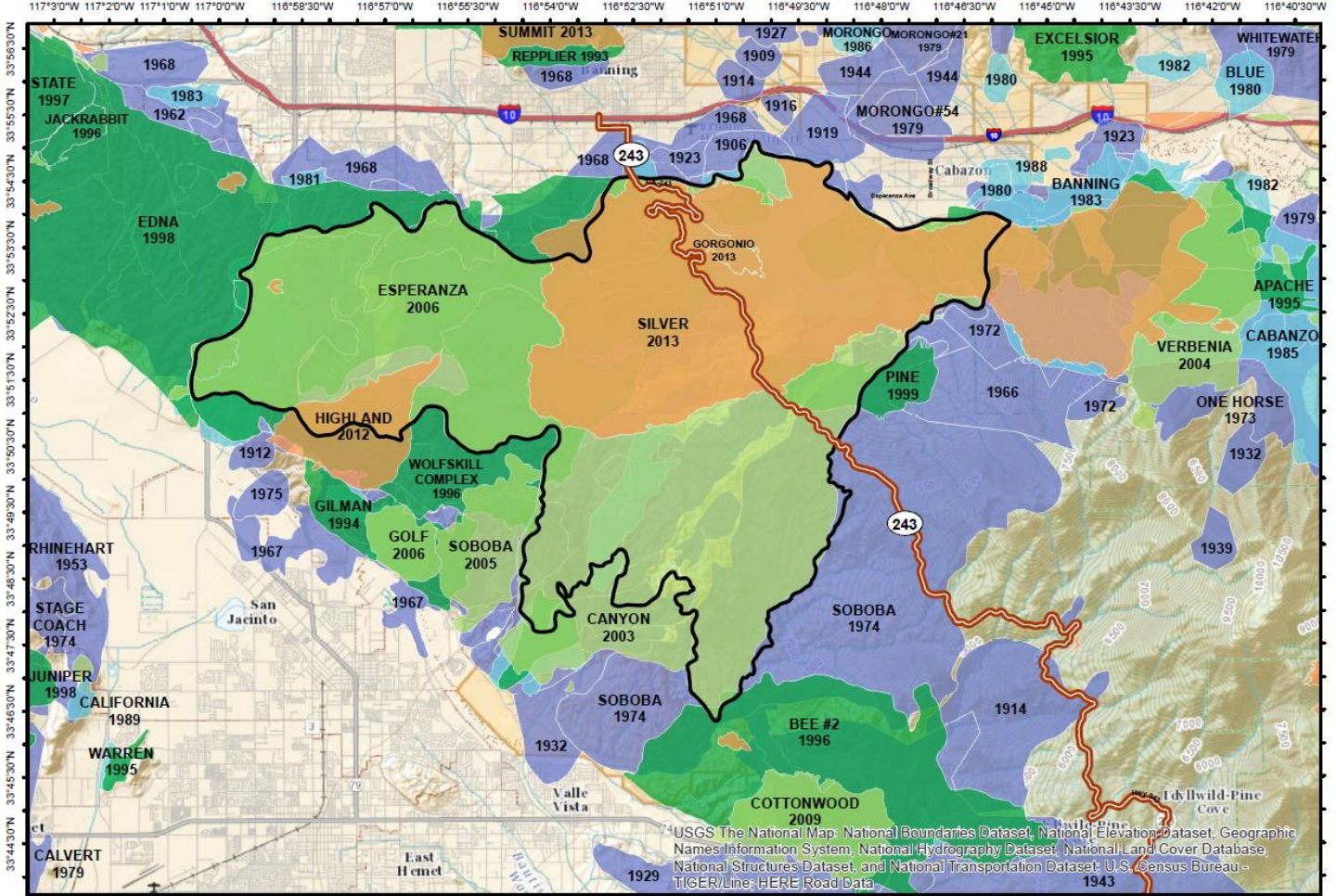
Google Maps Esperanza Road Map

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2006 Esperanza Fire Final Perimeter 10/29/2006 1100hrs
 Highway 243

Fire Year
 2000 - 2009
 1980 - 1989
 2010 - 2013
 1990 - 1999
 1979 and Earlier



FIRE HISTORY
 Map Date: 4/16/2015
 Author: San Bernardino National Forest
 Map Datum: NAD 1983

USGS The National Map: National Boundaries Dataset, National Elevation Dataset, Geographic Names Information System, National Hydrography Dataset, National Land Cover Database, National Structures Dataset, and National Transportation Dataset; U.S. Census Bureau - TIGER/Line; HERE Road Data