

He Plays Guessing Game With Flames

Fire Chief Faces Fearful Choices

By RONALD L. SOBLE, Times Staff Writer

Shortly after 9 a.m. Saturday, when it became abundantly clear that Malibu's pastoral hills were about to become an inferno, Deputy Los Angeles County Fire Chief Bob Sarno faced a familiar—but soul-searching—decision.

What part of Malibu would he try to absolutely save? What areas would he risk losing in an effort to deflect the fast-moving blaze from population pockets?

And, he said in an interview Tuesday, there was the question paramount in the history of Malibu's wind-driven brush fires: Where would the fire hit along the area's populated 27-mile coastline?

"It probably took me less than 15 minutes to make that decision," said Sarno, who was in charge of fighting last weekend's blaze that cut about a 12-mile swath through Malibu and burned to the ocean at Paradise Cove.

Twenty-six homes were lost.

In a nutshell, Sarno's decision was to alter the fire's collision course with the expensive homes in the famous Malibu Colony and to change its direction toward less populated canyon areas.

To allow the fire to continue on its original southeast course "definitely" would have invited disaster for the colony and Malibu's nearby commercial center and, possibly, for Topanga Canyon beyond, he said.

Sarno ordered 25 engine companies, six fire crews and a couple of tractors into a key area at the crossroads of Mulholland Highway and Stunt Road high in the Santa Monica Mountains. The result, he said, was that the fire took on a new southwesterly course "exactly as

we planned" toward Corral and Latigo canyons.

But, Sarno said, he also tried "to take the needs" of Latigo and Corral residents into consideration by putting as much equipment as he could spare into both of those canyons, which only have a handful of population pockets.

"I was hoping I wouldn't lose anything," he said.

That goal was accomplished in Corral Canyon. But 15 homes burned to the ground in Latigo Canyon.

"In all fairness, we couldn't have gotten any more equipment into

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Latigo," he said. "We would have been overcommitted and never would have got the equipment out.

"I felt badly that homes were lost (in Latigo) but I don't know what else we could have done" given the high winds, which precluded any help from helicopters or planes that could have dropped fire retardant chemicals.

Sarno, 51, has fought more than a dozen Malibu fires going back to 1958 when he was manning a hose as a line fireman.

Invariably, he said, the critical question is where Malibu's fierce brush fires will hit the ocean.

"Every time it's the same question," he said. "Where will it come out?"

In 1978, Santa Ana winds carried

the fire through Malibu Park to Trancas Beach where several beach homes burned. At that time, there was little fire equipment at the beach to fight the blaze because fire personnel were spread out fighting other blazes.

This time, said Sarno, he immediately stacked men and equipment along a seven-mile front on the Pacific Coast Highway from Malibu Canyon Road to Point Dume when the fire jumped the Ventura Freeway about 9 a.m.

But it made no difference at the beach community of Paradise Cove, where 39 mobile homes were lost shortly after 1 p.m. Strong winds pushed the blaze into a series of fireballs that leap-frogged the highway and overwhelmed his men, he said.

Moreover, he said, there were other factors working against his firefighters at Paradise Cove—poor road access for fire equipment, combustible shrubbery and the fact that the plywood-aluminum construction of mobile homes allows for easy ignition.

What did Sarno learn from the 1978 Malibu fire? He said that one basic lesson was that when a Santa Ana wind-driven fire jumps the Ventura Freeway, it's time to put equipment immediately on the Pacific Coast Highway a dozen miles to the west and play a guessing game with where the fire will hit.

Unfortunately, that strategy didn't entirely work last weekend, although several canyon and coastal residences were saved.

Will it happen again?

"Definitely," said Sarno. "I have no doubt it will happen again. If you live in (Malibu), you pay the price."