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Bizarre Lightning Storms Spawn 840 California Wildfires

By **Marcus Wohlsen, The Associated Press**
 posted: 24 June 2008 10:03 am ET

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — More than 840 wildfires sparked by an "unprecedented" lightning storm are burning across Northern California, alarming the governor and requiring the help of firefighters from Nevada and Oregon.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said he was told late Sunday evening that the state had 520 fires, and he found it "quite shocking" that by Monday morning the number had risen above 700.

Moments later, a top state fire official standing at Schwarzenegger's side offered a grim update. The figure was actually 842 fires, said Del Walters, assistant regional chief of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. All but a couple were in the northern part of the state.

"This is an unprecedented lightning storm in California, that it lasted as long as it did, 5,000 to 6,000 lightning strikes," Walters said. "We are finding fires all the time."

Two of the state's biggest fires had each charred nearly 6 square miles. One in Napa County quickly moved into Solano County, and threatened about 250 homes about 40 miles southwest of Sacramento, said Kevin Colburn, a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. It was 60 percent contained.

The other, in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest about 160 miles north of Sacramento, threatened about 1,200 homes.

Out-of-state assistance, mostly firefighting aircraft, arrived from Nevada and Oregon in response to weekend requests. Schwarzenegger said he had enlisted the help "because you can never prepare for 500 or 700 or 800 fires all at the same time."

Part of the reason for the swelling number of wildfires was that local and state officials were still counting after fierce thunderstorms Friday night touched off the blazes.

"We didn't get real lucky with this lightning storm," Walters said. "It wasn't predicted — which often happens with these storms that come in off the Pacific, there's no history of the weather as it approaches the shore — and so we got hammered."

In Mendocino County alone there were 110 fires, with just 17 contained.

Along the coast in Los Padres National Forest, a 2,000-acre wildfire burning south of Big Sur since Saturday forced the evacuations of 75 homes and businesses, destroyed one house and threatened hundreds of others.

It also led to an emergency airlift Sunday of eight endangered California condors. U.S. Coast Guard helicopters transported the seven juveniles and one adult bird from a wildlife center to the Monterey Airport.

A second fire in Los Padres burned more than 57,000 acres and has injured nine firefighters.

In New Mexico, crews dropped 11,500 chemical balls injected with antifreeze to try to ignite unburned vegetation and halt a blaze that has charred more than 49,000 acres, largely on grazing allotments on federal land.

Lightning sparked the fire Tuesday in the Lincoln National Forest about 20 miles southwest of Hope. It was not threatening any structures.

"The ranchers have already moved a lot of the cattle that were out there," U.S. Forest Service fire information officer Deanna Younger said. The grazing areas "will be the main loss," she said.

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