



GARY CORONADO For The Times

SCIENTISTS take soil samples among Joshua trees in Upper Covington Flat in Joshua Tree National Park.

Report denies failures in Eaton fire alerts

Evacuations handled properly, review finds. But critics decry lack of accountability.

BY GRACE TOOHEY AND JENNY JARVIE

More than a year after the deadly Eaton fire swept through Altadena, killing 19 people, a new, outside review of firefighters' decision-making concluded "there was no failure" by L.A. County fire officials in ordering evacuations.

The report, released Monday and commissioned by the Los Angeles County Fire Department, found that incident command could not have "reasonably" requested evacuation orders for the area earlier because they weren't aware the fire was moving into west Altadena.

Over the last 16 months, The Times has reported on mounting evidence that fire was threatening west Altadena well before evacuation alerts were issued, with several spot fires and heavy smoke reported, but it took hours to evacuate the historically Black neighborhood. Those revelations — based on 911 calls, dispatch records and harrowing resident accounts of perilous escapes — prompted the California attorney general in February to open a civil rights investigation into potential disparities in the fire response, looking particularly at delays in evacuation alerts and resource allocation.

The new 51-page report, however, doesn't acknowledge any shortcomings related to the evacuation alerts. Rather, it points out that many conditions that had existed there for years — streets aligning with the canyons, dense neighborhoods with heavy tree canopies that can help spread fire — combined with the strong winds and lack of intelligence from aircraft overhead "made stopping the fire spread impossible."

L.A. County Supervisor Kathryn Barger, who has previously said there was a "breakdown" in how evacuation alerts went out, said the report found that "Unified Command did not engage in misconduct or intentionally delay evacuation decisions affecting areas west of Lake Avenue."

"At the same time," Barger said in a statement, "this investigation should not be interpreted as dismissing the experiences of residents. Public trust requires both accountability and a willingness to learn from every aspect of a disaster response."

For many in the community [See Altadena, A12]

Fungi could be key to Joshua tree survival

Scientists hope answers are buried in the sand

BY ALEX WIGGLESWORTH

MOJAVE NATIONAL PRESERVE — In the heart of the Mojave National Preserve, a scientist hunted for a baby Joshua tree that would never make it to adulthood.

She parted some creosote branches to reveal a shriveled shrub, just ankle high. This doomed seedling was part of a National Park Service planting effort to replace dozens of Joshua trees cut down by a Southern California Edison contractor tasked with protecting the company's power lines.

But of the 193 babies planted here roughly five years ago, only 27, or 14%, are still alive, according to the park service. If researchers don't figure out why so few survived, an imperiled icon of the California desert may disappear even more quickly.

"Joshua trees are so resilient — they've been around for millions of years," said Anne Polyakov of the Society for the Protection of Underground Net-

works, who led the expedition. "But now they're facing too many stressors all at once."

Described by some as spiritual guides or even family members, Joshua trees have inspired a wide range of artists and writers, from Indigenous people and pioneers to U2 and the creators of "Euphoria."

The spiky succulents are signifiers of what makes the desert special to people, said poet Ruth Nolan, the Mojave Desert literary laureate. Unique and a bit weird, they speak to something deep and ancient. And although their shaggy boughs somewhat resemble teddy bears, they're sharp if you step too close.

"They kind of represent the whole spirit of the desert," she said. "It's beautiful and inviting, but it's also really tough and acerbic."

Joshua trees also play a key role as a linchpin of the Mojave Desert ecosystem. [See Joshua tree, A10]



ERIC THAYER Los Angeles Times

YOSEMITE visitors gather at Glacier Point to watch the sun set over Half Dome.

Bracing for 'an absolute mess' of summer crowds at Yosemite

BY JACK DOLAN

From Columbia Rock, 1,100 feet above Yosemite Valley, the crown jewel of America's beloved national parks spreads out beneath you.

The jaw-dropping north face of 8,800-foot Half Dome towers to the east. The silky green ribbon of the Merced

River meanders through the valley floor below, astonishingly lush during the spring snowmelt. Even cars in the parking lots look fabulous, their roofs and windshields sparkling in the golden sunshine like so many tiny gems.

And then you realize those gems are everywhere — as far as the eye can see — because every single parking space in the valley is full.

On the way down from that vantage point, Upper Yosemite Falls Trail, which was practically empty at 9 a.m., had turned into a human conveyor belt by 11 a.m. Hundreds of people trudged up the steep switchbacks in single file.

That's what's giving parks enthusiasts heartburn this spring. [See Crowds, A10]

State's 'virtual power plant' may close

BY BLANCA BEGERT

Nancy Lipps and her son John, in Dinuba, are one of more than 200,000 households in California signed up for a statewide program that pays them to help the grid when it's very hot outside and electricity is at peak demand. They have a battery hooked up to their solar panels, and they share power from it in times of need. It was an easy choice.

"It gives back to our neighbors and helps make sure the grid is sustainable," said John Lipps, 52, who works in the lawn care business launched by his parents. It also provides the Lipps with a \$300 credit at the end of the year for helping out.

But those benefits could be coming to an end soon due to budget cuts. Letters signed by dozens of local officials, legislators from both houses, environmental

groups and clean-energy businesses have flooded in to try to save the program.

The state's Demand Side Grid Support Program works by tapping into an army of smart thermostats, EV chargers, and solar-powered batteries that are registered to share power or ramp down electricity use when the grid is strained.

According to clean-energy advocates, the program, launched in 2022, has been a [See Program, A16]

Suspects were radicalized and left manifesto, authorities say

Gunmen in mosque attack outlined 'religious and racial beliefs,' FBI says.

BY HANNAH FRY, RICHARD WINTON, SALVADOR HERNANDEZ AND CLARA HARTER

SAN DIEGO — The two gunmen who opened fire at a San Diego mosque on Monday, killing three people, had met online, where they were radicalized and left behind a hate-filled manifesto, authorities revealed Tuesday.

According to a witness, the pair were "fully armored" and rushed toward the entrance with handguns and rifles before security guard Amin Abdullah shot at and struck one of them.

A wrenching portrait was emerging about the moments before the attack, with the mother of one of the gunmen frantically calling police to say that her son had left a suicide note and that guns were missing. She told them her son left with a companion wearing camouflage outfits. Officers were interviewing her when the first reports of the active shooting occurred.

Mark Remily, FBI special agent in charge of the San Diego office, said the suspects left behind writings "outlining religious and racial beliefs about how the world they envision should look like."

But officials didn't provide any details about the writings or ideology, adding that they were still going

through electronic devices and examining the suspects' online presence to determine how they were radicalized.

"These suspects did not discriminate on who they hated," Remily said.

It also remains unclear why they targeted the Islamic Center.

San Diego Police Chief Scott Wahl said the actions of the security guard, as well as the two other victims who were killed in the parking lot of the center, distracted and delayed the two suspects, who scoured the mosque only to find empty rooms.

During the gunfight, Wahl said, the security guard had called out on his walkie-talkie for the school to be locked down, giving teachers, workers and more than 140 kids inside a chance to seek shelter.

"I had no idea how heroic those actions were," Wahl said Tuesday, noting that officials had viewed security video of the attack. "You can see the security guard reach for his radio and put out the lockdown protocol. The security guard then continued to engage in a gun battle with these two suspects."

In the exchange of gunfire, one of the gunmen who was shot by the security guard appeared unfazed and continued to charge toward the mosque, a witness and member of the mosque said in an Instagram post.

The guard shot at one of the suspects, "but they were fully armored so it did little to stop them," said the man, identified by mosque Imam [See Shooting, A9]

Pratt's crackdown on homeless would clash with realities

Candidate's call for arrests and mandatory care would face legal and financial hurdles.

BY ANDREW KHOURI AND DOUG SMITH

Los Angeles mayoral candidate Spencer Pratt says he wants to get tough.

The reality TV personality contends that drug addiction and mental health problems are the root causes of Los Angeles' homelessness crisis, and he has pledged to use the police and other coercive efforts to clean the streets.

"Once you start enforcing the law, things are going to move quick," Pratt said on Joe Rogan's podcast. "We're going around and we're just arresting people and the people that aren't getting arrested, we're getting to mandatory medical treatment."

During a mayoral debate this month, Pratt insisted that the homelessness crisis can't be alleviated "no matter how many beds you give

these people. They are on super meth, they are on fentanyl."

Such an enforcement effort would represent a sharp shift away from the city's current policy of largely voluntary measures and clash with the vision of Pratt's two main opponents in the race, incumbent Karen Bass and City Councilmember Nithya Raman, who has repeatedly voted against anti-camping zones.

"Making it illegal and arresting people is not the way to solve this problem," Bass said at the debate on KNBC-TV.

"When they're offered shelter, they go inside," Raman said at the same debate.

In public statements, Pratt has broadly characterized his solution to homelessness as enforcement, but has provided little detail on how he would get 27,000 people off the streets in the face of civil rights protections, limited jail capacity, budgetary constraints and lack of city control over already overwhelmed treatment [See Pratt, A12]

U.S. to end tax claims against Trump

Deal could help shield the president from further scrutiny of his finances and conduct. **NATION, A7**

Hilton, Becerra lead in latest poll

The latter is top Democrat in governor race despite barrage of negative ads. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Weather
Sunny and very warm.
L.A. Basin: 85/60. **B6**

Markets **A16**
Opinion Voices **A18**

Dudamel keeps L.A. in his sights

The New York-bound conductor says his ties to SoCal remain strong. **ENTERTAINMENT, E1**

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