

Bad omen for dangerous Calif. fire season

By Joseph Serna, Alexia Fernandez and Jason Song, Los Angeles Times

The fire started smoldering Wednesday afternoon off a curvy mountain road in the coastal hills north of Santa Barbara.

Then, infamous “sundowner” winds started blowing fiercely, and the Sherpa Fire suddenly exploded. Authorities frantically shut down the 101 Freeway and evacuated hundreds of homes within a 15-mile path of the blaze, which was being pushed by 50-mph gusts.

The fire was able to move so far because it was racing through overgrown hillsides and canyons that had not burned in more than 60 years.

The state is in its fourth year of drought, and officials say the Sherpa blaze is a grim omen for what could be a summer and fall of fire.

So far this year, wildfires have burned more than 30,000 acres on state and federal land. That is about equal or slightly higher than the same period in 2015, a particularly destructive year of fire that burned 307,598 acres and hundreds of homes and left at least nine people dead.

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