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## Water glitches hamper fight against studio fire

*A fast-moving blaze at Universal Hollywood's back lot destroys 'King Kong' tour and burns the sets of iconic films.*

June 02, 2008 | Bettina Boxall, Ari B. Bloomekatz and Joe Mozingo | Times Staff Writers

Low water pressure and an overwhelmed sprinkler system hampered the fight against a fast-moving fire that tore through two city blocks at the Universal Studios Hollywood back lot Sunday, destroying the "King Kong" tour and burning the sets for such blockbuster movies as "Back to the Future" and "Bruce Almighty."

The fire raged and smoldered for much of the day, sending up a huge cloud of smoke visible for miles. Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky and county Fire Chief P. Michael Freeman ordered an inquiry into whether the lack of water pressure in Universal's fire protection system allowed the blaze to get out of control at the world-famous studio and theme park.

"The water came out of hoses anemically," Yaroslavsky said. "The water-pressure issue is going to be the postmortem issue of this fire."

Some firefighters on the scene could get only a 10-foot spray from park hydrants and were unable to reach the vaulting flames.

The fire, fueled by highly combustible facades and lumber, rendered a sprinkler system on outdoor sets nearly useless, Freeman said.

Firefighters resorted to pumping water from two man-made studio ponds, including one that is home to the animatronic "Jaws" attraction. They also snaked hundreds of yards of hoses to street hydrants outside the park.

Nine firefighters and a sheriff's deputy were injured in the blaze, which was punctuated with 100-foot flames, early-morning explosions and then a second afternoon explosion as it consumed a cavernous video warehouse.

The cause of the fire was under investigation, Freeman said. Universal representatives declined to comment about the cause and the water-pressure issues.

The blaze erupted at 4:45 a.m. on New York Street -- a location that has played host to scenes for such films as "Batman and Robin" and "Austin Powers."

The flames churned through the open-air wood and plastic construction and to the adjacent sets, incinerating the 30-foot animatronic King Kong and damaging Courthouse Square, which played a prominent role in "Back to the Future," "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "Inherit the Wind."

Calm winds and a light marine layer kept the fire from spreading into the brush-covered hills nearby.

Yet the blaze engulfed the videotape warehouse, containing archives of television shows and movies dating to the 1920s. NBC Universal Chief Executive Ron Meyer said the tapes were copies and could be replaced.

By dawn, the towering cloud of black smoke made it look as if Hollywood was producing a film about its own doomsday.

The first 30 firefighters responding to the blaze showered the sets from three ladder trucks, said Daryl Jacobs, a county Fire Department spokesman. At that time, the water pressure was fine, he said.

By 6:30 a.m., as the fire turned into a conflagration, about 350 to 400 firefighters, with more than 20 ladder trucks and 40 engines, surrounded the area, spraying water-mixed foam retardant. As more firefighters sucked up more water, the water pressure began to drop precipitously.

County Fire Inspector James Barnes got word that some ladder trucks -- designed to jet up to 1,000 gallons a minute into burning buildings -- did not have enough force to reach the core of the flames.

"We all know there were challenges with water," Barnes said. "Whether the fire got bigger as a result, I could not tell you."

Commanders called in two water tanker trucks -- carrying 6,000 and 2,000 gallons -- and two helicopters, which dropped water for about an hour.

Barnes said that with so much equipment trying to converge on the area, many engines had trouble squeezing into the narrow streets. "Back there it's really tight, tight quarters," he said.

The fire burned in the video warehouse until late in the afternoon. A firefighter and a sheriff's deputy suffered minor injuries when they were knocked off their feet by a large explosion in the warehouse about 2:45 p.m., officials said.

As the fire threat receded, officials turned their attention to the problematic lack of water pressure.

Though the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power supplies Universal with water, the park is in unincorporated county territory and maintains its own system of mains, pumps and hydrants.

DWP spokesman Joe Ramallo said the agency tried to boost water pressure from its end, but the effort "had a negligible effect."

The DWP has upgraded its own system to ensure firefighters have sufficient pressure in Griffith Park and parts of the Hollywood Hills.

After a fire in 1990 roared through four acres of the back lot in 1990, Universal Studios installed a large sprinkler system designed to deluge flames, but it didn't seem to work Sunday.

"It appears the fire this morning overwhelmed fire-protection features," Freeman said. He said his department would look into the system.

"We're going to readily and quickly reevaluate that and see if that had any impact on the water pressure."

Sam Atwood, a spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, said the agency had taken air samples at the scene to test for hazards. He said the tests turned up no initial signs of danger, but that complete results would take several days.

He also said that any treated lumber that burned could produce harmful emissions, because it often contains arsenic.

Richard Drury, an Alameda, Calif., environmental attorney, said cheap plastics used at most industrial locations were also a worry. But Drury said it was important not to overstate the risks, noting that short-term exposure to carcinogens, for instance, might not pose a threat: "One-time exposure is probably not that significant."

More than 500 would-be visitors braved the noxious air all morning, based on announcements that the park would open after noon. But at 2:30 p.m., park officials said it would remain closed until 10 a.m. today.

"I'm frustrated," said Rob Polonsky, 23, a freelance video editor from Los Angeles, who called and checked the Internet before heading to the park Sunday morning. "They should have said from the start that they weren't going to open."

Jan Van Angelen, 25, a student from the University of Oklahoma, and his friend Hans Pul, 24, wanted to spend their last day in California at Universal Studios on Sunday.

The two had spent their weekend doing many of the tourist activities popular with Southland visitors.

Their last stop was at the park. They wanted to see the "Shrek 4D" ride.

"I thought it was a joke," Pul said when he saw the television images of smoke and fire.

By afternoon, shuttles were filled with visitors headed back to their parking structure.

"We've been through so many fires, we're used to it," said Doug Spinuzza, 41, an actor who went to the park with his 8-year-old son.

Fire is nothing new to the studio. Seven significant blazes have hit the lot along the Cahuenga Pass in the Hollywood Hills since 1932.

New York Street, in particular, burned to the ground in 1957 and 1990.

Filmed in the area were the TV shows "Crossing Jordan," "Monk," "Seinfeld," "NYPD Blue," "Kojak" and the movies "Dragnet," "Bruce Almighty," "The Sting" and the "The Blues Brothers."

The only television production affected by Sunday's fire was CBS' "Ghost Whisperer," but a CBS Paramount spokeswoman said the damage to exterior sets would not delay the fourth season's premiere.

Yaroslavsky said the latest inferno is a lesson that all the movie studios need to assess their vulnerability.

"It's enough of a wake-up call that we need to take another look," he said.

He added that the fire could have been a lot worse in different weather.

"All we know is that for an hour or more, the water pressure was inadequate," he said. "It's likely having optimal water pressure would have some impact on slowing the progress of the fire."

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[bettina.boxall@latimes.com](mailto:bettina.boxall@latimes.com)

[ari.bloomekatz@latimes.com](mailto:ari.bloomekatz@latimes.com)

[joe.mozingo@latimes.com](mailto:joe.mozingo@latimes.com)

--Contributors

Contributing to the Universal Studios fire coverage were: Kate Aurthur, Andrew Blankstein, Geoff Boucher, Amanda Covarrubias, Claudia Eller, Maria Elena Fernandez, Molly Hennessy-Fiske, Meg James, Susan King, Martin Miller, Jason Song, Janet Wilson and Richard Verrier.