

# Crews fight through wall of mud near L.A.

AP Associated Press

updated 1:41 p.m. PT, Sun., Feb. 7, 2010

## Residents of foothill suburbs allowed to return to their homes



Mike Meadows / AP

A Los Angeles County Fire Department rescuer carries a 91-year-old woman from her flood-damaged home in La Canada Flintridge, Calif. on Saturday.



LA CANADA FLINTRIDGE, Calif. - Residents of foothill communities deluged by weekend mudslides north of Los Angeles have been allowed to return home.

L.A. County Sheriff's Dep. Guillermina Saldana says the final evacuation order was lifted Sunday for about 70 homes in the Paradise Valley area of La Canada Flintridge. Only residents with valid identification will be allowed back into the neighborhood that was choked with a thick layer of mud and debris during a pummeling rain early Saturday.

Up to 800 homes were evacuated. Forty-three homes were damaged and nine were declared unsafe to enter. About 25 vehicles were damaged.

Earlier in the day, crews waded through thigh-high mud to check for gas leaks and survey damage.

"In my 20 years of fire service, this is the first time I've seen this much devastation caused by a weather system," Los Angeles County Fire Battalion Chief Mike Brown said while walking past suburban homes with thigh-deep mud in their yards.

Los Angeles County public works crews were using bulldozers and other heavy machinery to move boulders, scoop out catch basins and clear roads.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger toured the area Sunday, stopping to talk to reporters in front of a house where flowing mud left a mark on the wall at least 5 feet above the ground.

Schwarzenegger hugged a tearful resident whose voice broke as she told him that her entire first floor was inundated with at least 2 feet of mud. Karineh Mangassarian told the governor she wanted crews to start digging her house out immediately.

### **Schwarzenegger surveys damage**

"I want to save my house, but by the time the city gets here it will be too late," Mangassarian said outside her home, where mud reached up to the mailbox. One small rose bush poked out with a couple of pink blooms that withstood the rain.

Schwarzenegger said the three county sites set aside for mud disposal might not be enough.

"They need to clean up this area as quickly as possible from the mud. They need permits for a fourth dumping site, disposal site, which have to come from the federal government and the state," the governor said. "We all have to work together to help the people whose homes were damaged."

The sun was shining Sunday on barren mountaintops scarred by last summer's wildfires, but forecasters say more rain could arrive by Tuesday.

Some residents complained they were not told to get out until the brunt of the damage was done — unlike during heavy rains last month when officials repeatedly warned foothill communities to be on alert.

Los Angeles County Fire Chief Michael Freeman said by the time officials saw how serious the storm was, it was too late to order evacuations for some and it was determined that it would be safer for them to take shelter in their homes.

"We are operating just like everyone else, based on weather predictions," Freeman said.

### **800 homes evacuated**

About 800 homes across LA County were evacuated for parts of Saturday, but most were allowed to return home as another round of expected rains proved tame and moved on quickly. Flash flood warnings for foothill areas also were called off.

"You can't predict how much rain is going to fall," Brown said. "This goes to show, when we say evacuate, you need to go."

Rainfall totals topped 4 inches in a 24 hour period in some areas, the National Weather Service said. Los Angeles County Fire Inspector Matt Levesque said forecasters and county and city officials did not anticipate the magnitude of the slow-moving storm.

"It was more rain than anyone thought, and more intense too, Levesque said. "And it stalled there over the hillsides."

Several residents said they woke up around 4 a.m. to the sound of crashing and rain pounding on their rooftops.

### **'Like thunder'**

"It was like thunder," said Dave Becica, whose house was undamaged. "I said, I hope that's not the mountain coming down. It was the mountain."

Family photographs, toys, furniture items and other items were dotted throughout the debris that gushed into yards and streets.

Crews used bulldozers and other heavy equipment to clear masses of mud and rocks that blocked suburban streets and intersections.

Twelve homes had major damage, 31 others received minor or moderate damage and 25 cars were damaged, County Supervisor Mike Antonovich said. Nine of the homes were declared uninhabitable.

At least 30 of the damaged homes were on Ocean View Boulevard in Pickens Canyon.

"It was devastated, I was really, really shocked by what I had seen," Antonovich said after touring the damaged areas. "It's as if you were at Universal Studios on the tour seeing a war zone area."