

There's a science, if not an art, behind those blaze names

By Deborah Netburn  
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Their names are seared into the collective consciousness of California: The Griffith Park fire of 1933. The Bel-Air fire of 1961. The Tunnel fire of 1991. The Camp fire of 2018.

Spurred by high winds, low humidity and an abundance of fuel, California's most destructive fires remake its cities and scorch its wildlands.

When the fires rage, their names are all around us. They're hashtagged on our Twitter feeds. They scroll along the bottom of our television screens. They are plastered in giant letters across the front pages of our newspapers.

And long after the smoke has cleared, their names endure — a reminder of the drama and tragedy of the West's wildfire story.

“Names are more memorable than numbers, so we should be grateful that the practice started early and has continued,” said Stephen Pyne, a fire historian and emeritus professor at Arizona State University. “If a fire was known as LAFD-1961-57, nobody would care.”

How do these fires get their names? Who decides?

Fires are named almost the instant they are reported, said Scott McLean, a spokesperson for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, also known as Cal Fire. The decision is usually made by the dispatcher who takes the call. Less frequently, fires are named by the first responder to reach the scene.

After receiving a report of fire, dispatchers quickly plug its coordinates into a map and look for a nearby feature to use as a moniker. A geologic landmark like a valley, river or canyon will work. So will the name of a road.

“The name helps direct us to the location,” McLean said. “We respond to about 170 fires a week throughout the state. We don’t have time to second-guess ourselves. We get a location and a name, and then we get to work.”

Most fire agencies in California stick to a single word when naming a fire. That’s why the deadliest conflagration of 2018 was known as the Camp fire, not the Camp Creek fire. When a blaze broke out near Old rWaterman Canyon Road in San Bernardino in 2003, it was dubbed, simply, the Old fire.

The ominous-sounding Witch fire of 2007 in San Diego County was named for Witch Creek Canyon in Santa Ysabel, where the first spark ignited. The Rattlesnake fire of 1953 got its handle because it was burning through Rattlesnake Canyon in the Mendocino National Forest when it was first reported.

The names can be evocative, even poetic. Or not.

“It’s not my position to say, but I would give the dispatchers a character count rather than making them stick to a single word,” Pyne said. “It would help the public. With one-word fires you can get really klutzy names.”

When Pyne worked for the National Park Service putting out fires near the Grand Canyon in the 1960s and ‘70s, the labeling of fires in the wilderness was a free-for-all.

“We named after girlfriends, we named after incidents that occurred during the fire, we indulged in wordplay — all of which made us feel more attached to the fires and their stories,” he said.

That would not fly at most agencies that respond to fire today.

In 2012, the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, issued a memo detailing best practices for fire-naming conventions and protocols.

NIFC advised against naming fires after people, private properties or companies. It said no fire’s name should ever include the words “dead man” or “deadman.” It said naming fires after previous catastrophic fires was frowned

upon. And under no circumstances should anyone succumb to the temptation to use a “cute” name like Cross fire, Sure fire or Cease fire.

“What may be funny to one person or group may not be to another,” NIFC officials wrote.

Yet even with these warnings in place, unfortunate fire names are bound to happen. A fire that broke out in Simi Valley on Wednesday was named the Easy fire because it started on the corner of Easy Street and Madera Road. In view of the fire’s strength, some media outlets referred to it as the “so-called Easy fire.”

In 2015, an emergency crew member in Idaho responding to the 57th fire of the season at 3 a.m. on an August morning gave up trying to come up with a meaningful moniker and named it the Not Creative fire.

Occasionally, fires occur at the same location over and over, and so they get numbered.

In Idaho, where there are lots of Sheep Creeks and Deer Points, there are also multiple Sheep Creek fires and Deer Point fires, said NIFC spokeswoman Carrie Bilbao.

“Sometimes the call comes in and the dispatcher will have to say, ‘We already had a Deer Creek fire this year, so they’ll have to call it Deer Creek 2,’” she said.

RedZone, a Boulder, Colo., company that provides fire intelligence and analysis, recently examined the names in its national wildfire database and found that the same ones were indeed used over and over again. All together, it counted 28 Cottonwood fires, 24 Canyon fires and 24 Bear fires between the years 1895 and 2010.

These issues don’t come up with hurricanes, which have a very strict naming system imposed by the World Meteorological Organization. The centerpiece is a predetermined list of male and female names which are used on a six-year rotation. The only exceptions occur when a previous storm with the same name was so destructive that it would be inappropriate to use the future.

McLean said he prefers the way fires get named.

“I think hurricanes need more creative names, but that’s just me,” he said.

Ultimately the name of a fire, like the name of a rock band, provides little indication of its power and reach.

“A great fire can have a fatuous name,” Pyne said, while “a dazzling name can’t make a great fire.”

In the end, “the name gives it a useful handle, but it’s the fire’s story that matters.”