

Texas

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know anything but your house is probably burning."

Rick Blakely, 54, said when it finally would be time to return home, "I'm not expecting anything to be standin' g."

He was among about 30 people who slept on cots at the church. "There was someone who asked how I was and it's a state of shock," he said. "I just don't know what I'm going to do."

The new outbreak led Gov. Rick Perry to return home to Texas, cutting short a visit to South Carolina where he was campaigning for the Republican nomination for president. He also canceled a trip to California.

Perry viewed the fire from the air and conferred with local officials. He said seeing the fire was a "surreal" experience.

"I've seen a number of big fires in my life," he said. "This is as mean looking as I've ever seen, particularly because it was so close to the city."

Since December, wildfires in Texas have claimed 3.5 million acres, an area the size of Connecticut, Perry said. The fires have destroyed more than 1,000 homes, he said.

Perry said it was too early to say whether he would attend Wednesday's GOP debate in California.

"I'm not paying attention to politics right now," he said. "There will be plenty of time for that. People's lives and their possessions are at stake, and that's substantially more important."

Authorities mobilized ground and air forces to fight the largest of at least 63 fires that broke out in Texas since Sunday as high winds from what was then Tropical Storm Lee swept into Texas, which has endured its worst

drought since the 1950s. "It's still putting up a lot of smoke and it's scary," Jan Amen, a Texas Forest Service spokeswoman said.

School and school-related activities were canceled for Tuesday.

There were no immediate reports of injuries, and officials said they knew of no residents trapped in their homes.

On Sunday, however, about 200 miles to the northeast in Gladewater, a 20-year-old woman and her 18-month-old daughter died when a fast-moving wildfire gutted their mobile home. That fire was out Monday, although several other major blazes continued to burn in at least four other counties in Central and North Texas.

At least two-thirds of the 6,000-acre Bastrop State Park, a popular getaway just east of Bastrop, had been consumed, said Mike Cox, with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. All nonessential workers had been ordered out of the park.

"All I see is a wall of smoke," Cox said from the park's front gate. The park is home to several historic rock and stone buildings constructed in the 1930s and 1940s by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

"We're desperately trying to save them," Cox said. "The fire is getting closer and closer to that part of the park."

It's also home to the Houston toad, a 2- to 4-inch toad that's been on the endangered species list since 1970.

Officials remained uncertain as to how the Bastrop blaze began, but it appeared that two fires merged to form the "monster" fire, Amen said.

To the west of Austin in Travis County, at least 20 homes were lost and 30 others were damaged in another fire. More than 1,000 homes were under mandatory evacuation and 25 lost in a third fire also in the Austin area.

Texas has experienced more

than its share of destructive storms, including Hurricane Ike three years ago. The state, however, would have welcomed the rain that Tropical Storm Lee dumped on Gulf Coast states farther east.

Instead, Texas got Lee's winds, which combined with an advancing cold front to heighten the threat of blazes in a state where crews have responded to nearly 21,000 wildfires since the traditional fire season began early in the year.

All but three of the 254 counties in Texas are under outdoor burn bans.

The governor's office said at least 40 Texas Forest Service aircraft were involved in the firefighting Monday along with a half-dozen Texas military aircraft. Since the beginning of the wildfire season, local and state firefighters have responded to more than 20,900 fires burning more than 3.6 million acres.

Joyce Payne, 62, and her husband, Mac, said they fled their Bastrop-area home Sunday night, responding to orders delivered by firefighters using a loudspeaker on a truck. She said their home since 2006 now was gone.

"We had a swimming pool," she said. "Too bad there wasn't a way to pump that water back out."

She said people have told her she should cry, and added: "I feel like crying."

U.S. Chamber Of Commerce Spells Out Its Own Job Agenda

WASHINGTON (AP) — Putting a business imprimatur on the debate over jobs, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on Monday issued an open letter to Congress and to the White House calling for a series of measures designed to increase employment, including greater oil drilling, quicker road and bridge construction and temporary corporate tax breaks.

If enacted, the chamber estimates the steps could encourage corporations to spend much of the nearly \$2 trillion dollars that have accumulated on their balance sheets and generate more than 6 million jobs by 2013, and even more in ensuing years.

The chamber is looking to influence job creation proposals just days after a bleak government employment report showed no net job growth in August and four days before President Barack Obama delivers an economic speech to a joint session of Congress. Chamber proposals on trade and infrastructure are sure to overlap with some Obama administration initiatives. Others, such as the corporate tax breaks and oil drilling, are more certain to win Republican support.

Chamber President Thomas Donohue released the seven-page letter as the first step in a campaign to draw attention to the chamber's proposals and influence Washington pol-

icymakers. The effort includes newspaper and Internet ads and outreach to chamber members nationwide.

The campaign will encourage business leaders across the country to contact members of Congress and the White House to prod them into passing job creation legislation. Chances that the president and congressional Republicans can reach any kind of deal appear to be a long-shot amid a partisan environment and testy relations.

Donohue identified six job creating initiatives:

— Offering reduced tax rates to corporations on profits earned overseas, a move that the chamber says would encourage multinational corporations to bring as much as \$1.2 trillion to the U.S. economy, and by temporarily reducing the tax rate companies pay on the sale of capital assets.

— Passing pending trade agreements with Colombia, South Korea and Panama, modernizing export control measures and adopting changes in patent law to protect intellectual property.

— Increase oil and gas exploration to levels in place before the Gulf oil spill prompted a moratorium on offshore drilling permits, expand oil and gas exploration on federal lands and approve a \$7 billion, 1,700-mile oil pipeline from Canada to the

Gulf Coast. The pipeline proposal has prompted daily protests at the White House which had resulted in high-profile arrests, including that of actress Daryl Hannah.

— Congressional approval of transportation, aviation and water resources programs that finance road, bridge and airport construction. Those programs are mostly paid for with gasoline taxes or other user fees. Obama has repeatedly called on Congress to approve the measures, reiterating his appeal as recently as Saturday in his weekly radio and Internet address.

— Facilitate tourism by promoting American travel, streamlining visa applications and speeding up security screenings for low-risk travelers.

— Provide regulatory relief for industries, including a moratorium on rules that are deemed to have a significant economic impact until the economy has improved and employment has grown.


Obama pleased business interests, and angered environmentalists, on Friday by withdrawing a proposed regulation that would tighten smog standards. The proposed rule was estimated to cost the economy anywhere between \$19 billion and \$90 billion a year and had prompted an outcry from Republicans and industry leaders.

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Wagner

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organizations, and horses traveled the parade route without incident.

Many float occupants were dressed in retro outfits or found other ways to adhere to the parade theme of "Those Were The Days."

Aaron Poor Bear, an announcer for the parade, said he didn't believe last year's accident had much of an impact on attendees this year.

"A small accident like that doesn't affect a lot of people's habits," he said. "People like coming together and seeing each other. It's a sense of community and an enjoyment of seeing old friends. You come back to where you grew up."

Ron Mazourek was driving a Wagner Fire Truck in the parade last year when the emergency call came across about the mule accident. He said he was happy that changes were made this year.

"I thought for years they should have gotten the candy closer to the kids," Mazourek stated. "But it always takes something happening before you realize you have a problem and need to fix it."

The hour-long parade was the signature event of three days worth of activities for the community of about 1,500 residents. Frei believed the weekend would draw between 10,000-15,000 people to the town.

Other events included the Merriam Midway Carnival, Tri State Cage Fighting, a rodeo, a barbecue cook-off, a bean bag contest, live music and a figure 8 race at the Wagner Speedway.

It is the 11th year Wagner has held the weekend celebration, and Mazourek said it is a tradition appreciated by young and old that will continue to hold the community together.

"For a small town, Wagner has a lot of young business people," he said. "They try to be the best they can with what they've got. They're always trying to get better and promote the town because they don't want it to get stagnant. That's why Wagner is what it is. There are a lot of young business people who want a thriving community."

Garden

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still beautiful, he said. "I'm proud of the fact that it still looks as good as it does," Hoffart stated.

Frick said she hopes that the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks causes people to pause at the Fourth and Douglas intersection.

"Every time we go by, I look to see how it is doing," she stated. "I hope other people notice it, too."

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