

## Watching the L.A. skies

Joe Ferullo | Aug. 31, 2009 NCR Today

Walk the streets of Los Angeles, and you'll notice an unusual number of people looking nervously over their shoulders, checking the sky. This has nothing to do with some sudden jump in the crime rate, or the chance a reality television crew may spontaneously begin taping your every move. It's the smoke. We are all watching the smoke.

Fire season, as we call it here, came early this year. Normally, it kicks in sometime around mid-November, when the humidity drops to the single digits and fierce Santana winds barrel in from the desert. By then, it has not rained here since April or May -- and the fire is just waiting to happen.

But now, in year four of devastating drought, the fires have made an early appearance. By the middle of last week, a fairly mild summer bolted into high gear -- like a teenager racing for the beach after suddenly realizing he had a few more days left before school started up again. Temperatures soared above one hundred and all moisture simply vanished.

By Friday, huge clouds of smoke hung over most of Los Angeles County, dropping ash all over, making breathing an adventure. On Sunday, the winds shifted further -- and on our way church that morning, we couldn't see across the street through the layers of smoke that had settled in over the San Fernando Valley.

Monday has brought no relief -- the fires doubled in size overnight, and are spreading toward denser [suburbs in the San Gabriel Mountains](#) [1].

For long-time residents, this is really nothing new -- it is only the timing that worries them. It's late August, so what will November bring, when the desert winds return? Stronger heat? Larger fires? Or will have everything already burned that possibly could?

Of course, in Southern California, every cloud of ash has its silver lining: I bumped into one L.A. native Sunday outside church, and he was smiling as he stared up at the spreading smoke. He looked down at me and said it reminded him of the L.A. of his childhood, back in the 1960's. "Every day kind of looked like this back then," he told me -- the city covered by a continuous blanket of smog.

"Makes you appreciate how much we were able to clean the place up." He smiled again and looked back up, absorbed in his memories.

**Links:**

[1] <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/wildfires/>