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ORANGE COUNTY FIRE DEPT. FIGHTING THE FIRES 250 YARDS FROM THE FOOTHILL RANCH FACTORY. PHOTOS: RIK KIRBY

‘All safe’ as California wildfires force Renkus-Heinz factory evacuation

FOOTHILL RANCH, CA – Renkus-Heinz was forced to evacuate its factory in Foothill Ranch, California yesterday, October 22, as the wildfires that have devastated large areas of California in the past few days came within 250 yards of the 50,000 sq ft facility. All employees left the building safely and structural damage was averted by a combination of the dedication of firefighting teams and a sudden change in direction of the wind. The factory reopened today.

A rapid decision was made by the company to evacuate to protect employees and vital documents as the Orange County Fire Department fought to contain the inferno that has already left two dead, scores injured and over 1,000 properties destroyed. US President George Bush has declared a state of emergency in California.

Renkus-Heinz VP of Operations Rik Kirby said that although the atmosphere had become smoky in the early morning there had not been an undue sense of alarm, but the situation deteriorated rapidly when the fires turned and bore down on the 10,000-population community. As flames leapt the nearby 241 toll road, fanned by winds that in many areas were estimated at up to hurricane force and fuelled by tinder-dry brush, the Fire Department ordered homes evacuated.

“When we saw flames in the distance from the office window we realised things had got pretty bad and we ordered all staff to leave, loaded computers and filing cabinets with design drawings into a truck, and got out,” said Kirby.

The wildfires have struck across a huge swathe of the state from northern Baja California, Malibu, Los Angeles and areas through Orange County as far south as San Diego. Foothill Ranch, part of Lake Forest, is located in the foothills of the Saddleback Mountains.

The blazes have been driven by an annual feature of the state’s weather, the Santa Ana winds, during which high pressure over the Great Basin between the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains drives air down towards the coast, reversing the prevailing westerly winds. As the winds are forced toward the coastal plain the air dries and heats through compression, and when funneled by canyons down onto the plain itself can drive intense firestorms in the already-arid brush. With the fire front advancing as rapidly as two miles in under an hour and changing direction abruptly, residents have had little warning or time to escape.

Over half a million people across California have been ordered to flee the fires in the last two days including many of Malibu's wealthiest and most famous residents, and over 1,000 homes have been destroyed. The winds and temperatures are forecast to fall on Wednesday.

Rik Kirby added: "We are deeply grateful to the Orange County Fire Department for their outstanding efforts in containing the fires. We're well aware that we've been very lucky to escape unscathed when so many others have not."

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