

## LOCAL

# Cal Fire to review county fire department's response to 2024 blaze



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Ventura County Star

Updated Feb. 2, 2026, 3:46 p.m. PT

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## Key Points

Authorities have said debris from an earlier fire likely reignited and led to the Mountain Fire.

Ventura County Fire Chief Dustin Gardner requested a third-party review of the department's response.

The larger, destructive blaze started near Somis, burned 31 square miles and destroyed 243 structures.

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*(This report has been updated with information about the timing of the review.)*

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection will review the Ventura County Fire Department's response during a small blaze that officials believe led to the Mountain Fire.

The local fire department has said that fierce winds and hot debris from an earlier tractor fire likely reignited, sparking the Mountain Fire in November 2024. The larger, destructive blaze started near Somis, burned 31 square miles and destroyed 243 structures.

A year later, the fire department released details of a months-long investigation, and officials reported the blaze started near the footprint of the Balcom Fire, which had burned a week earlier.

Ventura County Fire Chief Dustin Gardner has said he believes the department did everything it could to suppress the Balcom Fire and exceeded industry standards.

But he requested an independent review of the department's operations on the blaze.

Officials said they have reached agreement for Cal Fire to perform the review, expected to start later this month. Gardner described the state agency as the nation's leading expert on wildfire operations.

The review likely will take months to complete. Mike van Loben Sels, Cal Fire's southern region chief, and San Diego Unit Chief Tony Mecham are expected to lead the probe.

## **How did the Mountain Fire start?**

On Oct. 30, 2024, a tractor caught fire and flames spread into the brush near Balcom Canyon and Bixby roads in Somis. A tractor operator had been clearing brush when he noticed smoke coming from the engine compartment.

The fire burned an estimated 1.8 acres before it was declared out a few hours later. Firefighters put in multiple containment lines and used thermal imaging to scan for hot spots, dousing any they found, officials said.

The following morning, department personnel also flew a drone equipped with an infrared camera over the burn area, which showed two points of heat. One was near a containment line and another around the tractor near the center of the burn area, the department said.

Personnel dug out the hot spot near the containment line but described the heat at the tractor as something they would expect a day after the blaze.

For seven days, the fire-wrecked tractor sat in the middle of the burn area with no reports of smoke or other concerns, Gardner has said. The closest brush was a couple hundred feet away, according to officials.

But investigators say it is more likely than not that debris underneath the tractor reignited in 70 mph winds on Nov. 6, 2024. It became dislodged from a previously

covered pocket of hot debris and spotted more than 200 feet away.

In all, the Mountain Fire damaged or destroyed 369 structures and threatened thousands more in communities from Camarillo to Fillmore. No deaths were reported.

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