

Still no cause yet for fire that destroyed homes

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A fire in a Key Largo neighborhood spread quickly and destroyed two homes Sunday, largely due to a combination of high winds and lack of available water to battle the blaze.

"Water supply was definitely a challenge," said Chief Sergio Garcia of the Key Largo Volunteer Fire-Rescue Department.

The fire started at 716 Garden State Lane in the Cross Key Waterways subdivision at mile marker 103 on the bayside of U.S. 1. All the homes were unoccupied and nobody was injured, said Becky Herrin, a spokeswoman with the Monroe County Sheriff's Office.

Departments from Miami-Dade County, Islamorada and Monroe County helped put out the fire. A Sea Tow boat crew helped prevent the fire from spreading to boats docked in the marina by spraying canal water on the vessels and other structures, Herrin said.

Islamorada Fire Chief William Wagner said firefighters had the blaze under control in about 45 minutes, but that was long enough to burn up two homes, almost destroy a third and cause heat damage to a house across the street.

The nearest fire hydrant was at least 4,000 feet away -- too far for fire trucks to reach with their 1,000 to 1,200 feet of hose, Wagner said.

Garcia said water from the hydrant may have been insufficient, anyway, since a hydrant pumps out about 500 gallons of water per minute and Sunday's blaze required about 2,000 gallons a minute.

The firefighters fought the flames using a combination of water from pumper trucks and seawater drafted directly from the canal, Wagner said.

The canal water was accessed using fire trucks and with a device called a **TurboDraft**. Drafting the water using the trucks provides more power -- up to 1,000 gallons a minute -- because the vehicles have to pull right up to the water. The **TurboDrafts** provide about as much power as fire hydrants, Garcia said.

Using pumper trucks alone would not be enough, either, since they carry only up to 1,000 gallons and spray between 250 and 300 gallons per minute. These trucks were instead used to spray houses surrounding the original fire to keep it from spreading, Wagner said.

The extent of the damaged area complicates the search for the cause of the fire, said Monroe County Fire Chief Jim Callahan.

"There was a lot of burn area and collapse, so we're having some heavy equipment moved in to remove the debris," Callahan said. "Once we do that, we'll be able to get in and make a better determination of where it started and what ignited it."



Courtesy SHERIFF'S OFFICE

One of the houses burns on Sunday as firefighters work to extinguish the blaze.