

Firefighters work to keep California fire from Lake Tahoe

By Associated Press

The Business Journal and Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, August 24, 2021

(AP) — An army of firefighters worked Tuesday to try to keep a huge wildfire from pushing toward Lake Tahoe, the blue alpine lake surrounded by resort communities straddling the California-Nevada state line.

The Caldor Fire, growing explosively at times, has scorched about 184 square miles (476 square kilometers) and destroyed at least 455 homes since breaking out Aug. 14 in the Sierra Nevada southwest of Lake Tahoe.

Just 9% contained and a threat to more than 17,000 structures, the Caldor Fire has become the nation's No. 1 priority for firefighting resources, Chief Thom Porter, director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, said during a briefing Monday.

"It is knocking on the door to the Lake Tahoe basin," he said. "We have all efforts in place to keep it out of the basin, but we do need to also be aware that is a possibility based on the way the fires have been burning."

Porter said he personally did not believe the fire would get into the basin but added he could be proved wrong, given the extraordinary behavior of current fires, such as the 1,142-square-mile (2,958-square-kilometer) Dixie Fire to the north in the Sierra-Cascades region.

"Mother Nature has taken over and taken fires like the Dixie to places that I never thought was possible," he said.

The Dixie Fire, burning for more than a month, was 41% contained after destroying at least 1,262 buildings, including 679 homes.

For the second day in a row, smoke from California's massive fires kept schools closed in the Reno area of northern Nevada, affecting 67,000 students.

Overall, more than 14,000 firefighters were battling a dozen major wildfires in California on Tuesday, according to Cal Fire.

Nationally, 92 large fires were burning in a dozen states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center, in Boise, Idaho.

Climate change has made the West warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.

Smoke from California wildfires closes Reno schools again

Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Aug 24, 2021

RENO, Nev. (AP) — Schools in the Reno area of northern Nevada were closed Tuesday for a second straight day as smoke from massive wildfires burning in neighboring California caused hazardous air quality.

The Washoe County School District serves 67,000 students in Reno, Sparks and Incline Village at Lake Tahoe.

The poor air quality on Monday resulted in canceled flights and closures of schools, parks and popular summer beaches in the Reno and Lake Tahoe areas.

The National Weather Service said prevailing winds from the west mean "significant smoke and air quality impacts" will continue much of this week, affecting Reno, Lake Tahoe, Carson City and other areas.

In Las Vegas, more than 400 miles (644 kilometers) south of Reno, Clark County air quality officials issued a smoke advisory for Tuesday.

Thousands of firefighters were working to contain a dozen large California blazes that have destroyed hundreds of homes and forced thousands of people to flee to safety.

Caldor Fire 'knocking on the door' of Lake Tahoe Basin, Cal Fire says

By Lauren Helper, Gregory Thomas, Jessica Flores
San Francisco Chronicle, Tuesday, August 24, 2021

A scramble is on in the Sierra to seize on favorable weather conditions and keep the flames of the Caldor Fire out of the Lake Tahoe basin.

The 9-day-old blaze that has already destroyed 447 homes and consumed more than 114,000 acres is now the “No. 1 priority in the nation” for firefighting resources, Cal Fire Director Thom Porter said on Monday.

He warned that the fire was “knocking on the door” of the Lake Tahoe region, even after crews were encouraged by the progress of getting the fire 9% contained by Monday evening. Now, they’re just hoping the amenable weather lasts.

“We have all efforts in place to keep it out of the basin,” Porter said, “but we need to be aware that it is a possibility based on the way the fires have been burning.”

More than 2,000 firefighters and support personnel were working the dense, mountainous terrain as telltale signs of wildfire engulfed one of California’s most famous natural landmarks. Lake Tahoe’s sapphire-blue water looked an ominous shade of orange. Smoke choked the air as schools closed and resorts shuttered summer operations. Tourists and locals alike debated when it might be time to leave, especially with parts of busy Highway 50 closed.

All the uncertainty comes at a crucial moment for both the state and the mountain communities near Tahoe. Across California, the more than 1.5 million acres burned this year mark a 42% increase from the same early point in the fire season last year. Tahoe was also already grappling with an influx of remote workers and tourists seeking refuge from mask mandates and coronavirus anxiety, increasing competition for housing and adding to congestion.

As fire posed a new threat this week, some Tahoe locals called for tourists to stay away. Others said the onus was on would-be vacationers to monitor the situation.

“We don’t want to be in the business of suggesting whether they should or shouldn’t come up, because we don’t know about their health conditions or how they might be affected,” said Carol Chaplin, president and CEO of the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority. “It changes so much. We don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Signs of the Caldor Fire, along with the Dixie Fire burning farther north, were also visible in the Bay Area. Smoke drifting south from the fires was expected to linger, causing hazy skies. The Bay Area Air Quality Management District extended an air quality advisory through Tuesday, but because most of the smoke was expected to stay high in the air, a Spare the Air alert wasn’t needed. Air quality across the region was expected to be in either the “good” or “moderate” range Tuesday, the air district said.

The Dixie Fire burning in Butte, Plumas, Tehama, Lassen and Shasta counties slowed on Sunday because of cooler temperatures and increasing humidity, Cal Fire reported. It grew just over 1,700 acres Sunday night, burning a total of 725,821 acres after leaving a trail of near total destruction in towns like Greenville in recent weeks.

On the front lines of the Caldor Fire in El Dorado and Amador counties, more than 17,000 structures remained threatened on Monday, Cal Fire said. Fewer than 200 residents in El Dorado County were under evacuation orders, but wider warning zones remained.

With air sensors in the Tahoe area already maxing out above 500 AQI — meaning the air is hazardous and likely to impact healthy people — many locals started to evacuate even without an official order to do so.

Instead of dropping off their 2-year-old son for his first day of preschool in North Tahoe on Monday morning, Mike Rogge and his wife loaded up their car for an eight-hour drive south to Palm Springs to evade the hazardous air. Rogge, a magazine publisher, woke up with a scratchy throat and decided with his wife to evacuate — for at least a week.

“We’re not the first ones to leave, and I imagine we won’t be the last,” Rogge said. “I guess this is just part of living here now. It’s sad.”

For the past week, firefighters have been battling the Caldor Fire along with the Tamarack Fire — measured at more than 68,000 acres with 82% containment — south of the lake basin.

Last week, the U.S. Forest Service shut down all national forests in Northern California through Sept. 6., including those surrounding Tahoe, where some of the region’s most popular trails, campgrounds, lakes and backcountry areas are located.

California State Parks also banned campfires at campgrounds in the High Sierra last week, including the Tahoe and Truckee regions. The agency followed up over the weekend by shutting down popular West Shore parks — D.L. Bliss, Ed Z’berg Sugar Pine Point and Emerald Bay — until further notice “to help reduce traffic and visitation in the area.”

Through it all, Tahoe hotel operators and business owners are fielding phone calls from prospective visitors as the Labor Day holiday weekend approaches.

“The most common question of course is, ‘Is it going to be smoky on “X” day?’ which is difficult to answer,” said Andy Chapman, chief marketing officer for the North Lake Tahoe Convention and Visitor Bureau. “We’re telling people, it shifts and things change.”

On Monday, fire crews planned to focus on building and strengthening containment lines, especially on the fire’s eastern edge. One of the biggest challenges is rollouts — a term referring to dry, dead timber burning and smoldering as it rolls down hill, which is “easily igniting other vegetation,” said Cal Fire spokesman Keith Wade.

Fire crews were also carrying out an air fight against the fire and have dropped thousands of gallons of water and retardant on the flames in recent days. Heading into the new week, the weather “was, and still is, favorable for us,” Wade said.

So far, Tahoe tourism leaders say the uncertainty isn’t leading to an unusually high number of hotel cancellations. It seems, they said, that many Labor Day visitors are waiting to make the call until the last minute.

Residents like Rogge hope they’ll reconsider to leave roads open for emergency crews.

“Please leave Tahoe alone right now,” he said. “I understand that this is a tourism community, but it is a community first.”

Nearly half of Lassen Volcanic National Park burns in Dixie Fire

By Kurtis Alexander

San Francisco Chronicle, Monday, August 23, 2021

The massive Dixie Fire has burned through nearly half of Lassen Volcanic National Park on its extraordinary monthlong rampage, federal officials said Monday, leaving historical cabins and an iconic lookout tower in ruins.

The park, an area of old volcanoes and bubbling hot springs in California’s remote north, was hit by the blaze Aug. 5. Flames have since moved from the park’s southern edge east of Redding to its interior, pushing into such popular spots as Juniper Lake, Warner Valley and Summit Lake.

The fire had not burned the gateway town of Mineral, where the park keeps its headquarters, nor had it affected the mud pots, fumaroles and steam vents of the geothermal hotbed Bumpass Hell. The park’s visitor centers also were still standing.

“A lot of people here are crossing their fingers,” said Ana Beatriz Cholo, a spokesperson for the National Park Service. “This is still a very active fire.”

The park remained closed to the public, as did surrounding national forest land.

Typically, about a half million people visit Lassen Volcanic National Park each year. While popular with sightseers, hikers and campers, the park is far less trodden than its counterparts to the south, such as Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon.

The latest losses confirmed by the National Park Service were seven cabins and at least part of a campground on the shores of Juniper Lake, a high mountain lake surrounded by Lassen's thick forests.

All but one of the razed cabins were privately held, the plots dating to before the creation of the park. The one cabin that was federally owned was used for housing park employees working in the area. One private cabin on the lake survived the blaze.

The fire also wiped out the Mount Harkness Fire Lookout, a two-story wood-and-stone structure that, at 8,046 feet, helped locate wildfires across the Lassen wilderness since its construction in 1930.

Finally, a handful of outbuildings are believed to have been destroyed at the Drakesbad Guest Ranch in Warner Valley, though the ranch's main structures were reportedly unharmed.

In total, 47,945 acres of the park's 106,452 acres have burned, officials said. The acreage includes backfires purposely lit by firefighters to burn off trees and brush, and stymie the fire's forward progress.

While burning is often considered good for wildlands, by helping wipe out excess vegetation and rejuvenating plants and soils, preliminary surveys show that several spots in the park burned too hot to see any benefit.

"There are some areas that are more moderate burns, and some areas are more severe," Cholo said. "It's kind of a mixed bag."

Park officials said the firefighting effort has begun to pay dividends, and there's optimism that the northern half of Lassen will be spared. If so, this section of the park could reopen in a matter of months.

The Dixie Fire, which had charred 725,822 acres across five counties, is the second largest wildfire in California history. It was 40% contained as of Monday.

French, Walker fires continue to batter Sequoia National Forest. Tulare County to suffer brunt of smoke

By Joshua Yeager

Visalia Times-Delta, Monday, August 23, 2021

Two large wildfires continue to batter the Sequoia National Forest, burning together nearly 20,000 acres in less than a week and raining ash down on the San Joaquin Valley floor.

On Monday, the Walkers Fire in Kern County grew to nearly 15,000 acres and 15% containment, fueled by dry and hot conditions along with gusty winds.

Firefighters continue to make progress erecting containment lines, protecting communities and structures from the raging wildfire, which is spreading west.

"The overall strategy to contain the fire is to continue building containment line from the east end of the fire towards the west into higher elevations," fire officials said in a statement. "Aircraft continue to provide water drops on active portions of the fire perimeter, so ground crews can safely enter those areas."

The Kern County blaze started west of Lake Isabella on Aug. 18. Its cause is unknown.

Several communities south of the Tulare County border stretching toward Lake Isabella are under a mandatory evacuation order, including Wofford Heights, a mountain town of about 2,300 people.

An evacuation center has been established at Woodrow W. Wallace Elementary School in Lake Isabella.

No Tulare County communities are under threat at this time, the Tulare County Fire Department reported.

Walkers Fire

The Walkers Fire is burning along the boundary of Sequoia National Park and the national forest in eastern Tulare County.

The blaze has scorched 3,500 acres and is 38% contained, mostly along the fire's southern edge, fire officials reported.

Winds on Sunday caused spot fires to erupt deeper in the national park, threatening at least one historic cabin. Firefighters wrapped the Quinn Patrol Cabin in foil to protect it from the encroaching flames, forest officials said.

Hand crews and aircraft continue to work to contain the remote blaze. The burn scars from the Rough Fire and Castle Fire, which killed as many as 10% of the world's mature giant sequoia trees, are currently shielding down-mountain communities from the fire.

Smoke impacts

Winds will push smoke from the Walkers and French fires toward eastern Tulare County, blanketing gateway communities and the forest, the National Weather Service reported Monday.

The Valley floor, including Visalia and Tulare, should be spared the ash that rained down over the towns last week but air quality will still suffer and remain unhealthy for sensitive groups.

Wildfire smoke canceled athletic events across the central San Joaquin Valley late last week and over the weekend, turning the sky an apocalyptic hue.

On Saturday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District extended an air quality alert due to smoke impacts from California wildfires.

Exposure to particle pollution can cause serious health problems, aggravate lung disease, cause asthma attacks and acute bronchitis, and increase the risk of respiratory infections. Residents are advised to use caution when outdoors.

Air quality has been especially bad within the national parks, usually seen as a refuge from the pollution often found on the Valley floor.

The parks posted a warning on social media, cautioning visitors to limit their physical activity and warning that "scenic vistas might be less scenic than usual."

French Fire grows to 14,773 acres, with 15 percent containment

The Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Aug. 23, 2021

The French Fire expanded by 1,473 acres on its sixth day, according to a midday report from an interagency management team monitoring the blaze.

The fire has now scorched 14,773 acres near Isabella Lake and is only 15 percent contained, with 906 personnel on scene, the report said.

The destruction has spread at such a pace that the American Red Cross has opened a second shelter. In addition to Woodrow Wallace Elementary School, evacuees are now being aided at Kern Valley High School. Both buildings are on the same campus, located at or near 3340 Erskine Creek Road.

Late Sunday, fire crews were successful in keeping the fire west of Rancheria Road, away from Alta Sierra.

Crews worked on Sunday to construct a handline near Waggy Flat Road. Crews also extended the handline at Sawmill Road to better control the fire.

A handline is a streak of terrain where fuel has been removed. It is one of the primary methods of controlling a wildfire.

Increased fire activity was reported near Shirley Peak and Shirley Meadows, the report said. However, the fire was successfully kept south of Old State Road.

Humidity was expected to drop Monday, with warmer than usual weather conditions.

As of Monday afternoon, Highway 155 at Evans Road to Glennville was closed. All roadways within the evacuation area north and west of Wofford Heights Boulevard through Burlando Road were also closed.

Kern County Animal Services is assisting with sheltering companion animals. They are located at the evacuation center.

California firefighters battle a dozen large wildfires

By Associated Press

The Business Journal, Monday, August 23, 2021

(AP) — More than 13,500 firefighters were working Monday to contain a dozen large California wildfires that have destroyed hundreds of homes and forced thousands of people to flee to safety.

In Northern California, where most of the blazes are burning, there were no red flag warnings for critical conditions but the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said fire danger was expected to remain elevated through midweek.

Containment increased to 40% at the Dixie Fire, which has burned more than 1,130 square miles (2,926 square kilometers) in the northern Sierra Nevada and southern Cascades. Ongoing assessments showed 1,259 buildings destroyed, including 678 single-family homes, Cal Fire said. Nearly 13,000 structures remained threatened.

Tallies of losses also increased at the Caldor Fire, which has incinerated more than 166 square miles (430 square kilometers) of El Dorado National Forest on Sierra slopes southwest of Lake Tahoe. Continuing assessments showed 447 buildings destroyed. More than 17,000 structures were still under threat.

Cal Fire said the potential for large wildfires will continue to be low in Southern California. Intrusion of moist ocean air inland has been keeping skies cloudy and temperatures cooler than normal well into each day.

While Southern California has so far escaped large-scale wildfires this year, Los Angeles officials on Monday urged residents to be aware of what's going on in the north because the region's high fire season is typically late in the year when dry, gusty Santa Ana winds blast out of the interior and flow toward the coast.

"That awareness is going to help us when it happens here in Southern California," Los Angeles Fire Chief Ralph Terrazas said during a briefing to display the city's fleet of firefighting helicopters at Van Nuys Airport.

The mix of spring growth dried out by summer heat and high winds creates "a dangerous condition that could lead to large, fast-moving brush fires," he said.

California's fires were among more than 90 large, active blazes in the U.S. on Monday, according to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.

Climate change has made the West warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.