

## **Washburn Fire: Experts warn smoke from Yosemite wildfire could move into Central Valley**

By Brittany Jacob

ABC30, Monday, July 11, 2022

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FRESNO, Calif. (KFSN) -- The iconic scenery of the Yosemite Valley is now shrouded in smoke.

The Washburn Fire, which started near the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, has burned more than 2,300 acres and remains only 25% contained as of Monday afternoon.

Air officials are warning that the smoky air could move into the San Joaquin Valley overnight, so residents should protect themselves now.

Visitors to Yosemite were faced with an hour-long wait at the Highway 140 entrance gate, and a view of smoky skies blanketing many parts of the park.

"We are very sad, very sad for the nature, very sad for our American people, for this beautiful treasure of this national park of Yosemite," said Emmanuel Cirrodde, who was visiting from France.

Another pair of visitors, Micah Centanni and his girlfriend, just did the 16-mile hike to Half Dome on Sunday.

Centanni said smoke reduced visibility, and ash fell all over their camp.

"Today our entire tent, the top of tent, was filled with ash," he said.

While there's the smoke and ash you can see, there are also particles that are basically invisible that can impact your health.

"As we see the smoke come into the Valley, we want residents to understand that really it's a risk until the fire is out," said Jaime Holt, Chief Communications Officer with the Valley Air District.

Holt said the weather has been pushing the smoke east, avoiding the San Joaquin Valley, but residents still need to take precautions.

"If we start to see those unhealthy levels of air quality in the Valley, we really want folks to take precautions and protect themselves from this smoke," Holt said.

Some precautions he advised - staying inside with your doors and windows shut, and running air conditioning and air purifiers with fresh filters.

If you have any condition like asthma, emphysema, or COPD, you need to be especially careful, as the smoke will aggravate it.

Back at the Mariposa Visitor Center, workers are advising tourists to enjoy the park, but to just take it easy.

"Don't go to the hardcore hikes," said Jacob Hawley with the Mariposa Visitor Center.

Officials said if you can smell smoke and see ash, that's an indication that you are being affected by poor air quality.

## **Yosemite wildfire updates: Firefighters 'confident' of saving Mariposa Grove**

BY Jim Guy

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, July 12, 2022

Incident commanders fighting the Washburn Fire in Yosemite National Park expressed confidence in their efforts Monday evening, but said fire crews were facing intense, extreme heat as they worked to protect Mariposa Grove.

At a community meeting in Oakhurst, Matt Ahearn, deputy operations chief with the California Interagency Incident Management Team, described the fire as slow-moving, "just sitting there,

billowing smoke,” and said firefighters were also working to keep the blaze from crossing Highway 41.

The Washburn Fire was reported to be 25% contained at one point Monday, before containment slipped back to 22% by 7 p.m.

The fire, fueled by heavy accumulations of large timber and shrubs, had burned 2,720 acres as night fell. A warm, dry night with low relative humidity was expected to do little to slow fire activity as the night progressed.

#### EVACUATION ORDER IN WAWONA

An evacuation order remained in effect for Wawona, and incident commanders said they could not tell anxious community leaders when they could expect to return to their homes.

But Ahearn told those at the meeting that he was “feeling confident with the plan” to defeat the fire and was “excited” to protect Mariposa Grove.

At the meeting:

Madera County Supervisor Tom Wheeler blamed a lawsuit that put a stop to a Yosemite logging plan for possibly contributing to the fire. Ecologist Chad Hanson, co-founder and director of the John Muir Project and an opponent of the logging plan, could not be reached to comment on Wheeler’s remarks.

Cicely Muldoon, superintendent of Yosemite National Park, called Mariposa Grove “the root of the whole national park system.”

Incident Commander Josh Boehm said his Southern California-based team got the first call to the Washburn Fire on Thursday night and was on the road by 5 a.m. Friday. “We’ve done a ton of work,” he said. “We have every available hot shot crew (on the fire). We want to get the fire out and get these firefighters back home.”

Residents of Fish Camp were told that their community faced a “very low threat” from the Washburn Fire.

Muldoon said there was no lightning the day of the fire, and that it appeared to be human-caused. The incident managers say the cause is under investigation.

### **Crews ‘confident’ they can protect sequoias in Yosemite; other CA wildfires near containment**

By Lucy Hodgman

Fresno Bee and other papers, Tuesday, July 12, 2022

Fire crews battling to protect an ancient stand of sequoias inside Yosemite National Park expressed confidence they could keep the Washburn Fire from reaching Mariposa Grove in the face of intense flames and extreme heat.

The fire, which ignited on July 7, had charred 3,221 acres by Tuesday morning, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

At a community meeting in Oakhurst, Matt Ahearn, deputy operations chief with California Interagency Incident Management Team 13, described the fire as slow-moving, “just sitting there, billowing smoke,” and said firefighters were also working to keep the blaze from crossing Highway 41.

The Washburn Fire was reported to be 25% contained at one point Monday, before containment slipped back to 22% by 7 p.m.

An evacuation order remained in effect for Wawona, and incident commanders said they could not tell anxious community leaders when they could expect to return to their homes.

But Ahearn told those at the meeting that he was “feeling confident with the plan” to defeat the fire and was “excited” to protect Mariposa Grove.

Firefighters had cut by hand a containment line across the entire northern edge of Mariposa Grove, he said.

Firefighters were mindful of the possibility the flames could move farther east and south, which could bracket one end of the grove.

The fire’s cause remained under investigation but authorities consider it human-caused because there was no obvious natural spark.

#### ELECTRA FIRE NEARING CONTAINMENT

Crews battling the Electra Fire along the Amador and Calaveras County line have contained 93% of the fire, which ignited on July 4.

The fire has burned 4,478 acres in the eight days it has been burning, and Cal Fire authorities do not expect full containment until July 15.

According to a Tuesday morning update from Cal Fire, hot and dry weather conditions and lowering humidity have caused heavy fuels and continued smoldering. A fire suppression repair strategy is being implemented as firefighters continue to patrol and reinforce control lines.

Evacuation orders for communities in Amador County have been reduced to warnings, but the area within the fire perimeter remains closed and under evacuation order.

In Calaveras County, evacuation orders remain in place for zones CCU-E024-A and CCU-E051-B along Highway 26.

#### RICES FIRE MOSTLY CONTAINED

The Rices Fire, which broke out near Rices Crossing Road and Cranston Road in Nevada County on June 28, reached 98% containment on Tuesday morning.

The fire has burned 904 acres, destroying one structure and threatening 520, according to Cal Fire.

Evacuation orders remain in place in Bridgeport, near Rice’s Crossing, and in the Buttermilk, French Corral Birchville, and Sweetland areas.

#### UPDATES TO FIRE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES

The Fire Integrated Real Time Intelligence System (FIRIS), a program intended created by the Orange County Fire Authority and Cal Fire to improve situational awareness for first responders through real-time imagery, announced on social media Monday that it will migrate to the California Office of Emergency Services over the next six months.

FIRIS will now status themselves as OES Intel 12 and OES Intel 24, according to the announcement, but all products and data will remain unchanged. Intel 12 can provide 12-hour coverage seven days a week from its base at McClellan Airport near Sacramento while Intel 24 can provide coverage at all hours from its base in Los Alamitos in Orange County.

Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has introduced a new system to detect and identify drones that are illegally interfering with firefighting activities by flying close to firefighting aircraft during operations, according to a report by CNN.

“When the detection equipment finds the drone and identifies the operator’s location, we can very rapidly get that information to a ground intercept team who can then go make contact with that drone operator and essentially get them to stop flying that drone,” James Peaco III, the weapons of mass destruction coordinator for the FBI’s Los Angeles field office, told CNN.

It is a felony to fly a drone close to a fire during an active wildfire, according to Peaco.

## California firefighters gain against Yosemite wildfire

California firefighters have gained ground against a wildfire that poses a threat to a famous grove of giant sequoias and a small community in Yosemite National Park

By AP

Bakersfield Californian and other papers, Tuesday, July 12, 2022

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, Calif. (AP) — California firefighters gained ground Monday in the battle against a wildfire that poses a threat to a grove of giant sequoias and a small community in Yosemite National Park.

The Washburn Fire on the western flank of the Sierra Nevada had scorched about 4.2 square miles (10.9 square kilometers) but was 22% contained as of Monday night, according to an incident update.

The fire was a threat to more than 500 mature sequoias in the park's Mariposa Grove and the nearby community of Wawona, which has been evacuated.

The area in the southern portion of Yosemite was closed to visitors but the rest of the national park remained open.

Mariposa Grove and Yosemite Valley have been protected since President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation in 1864.

A sprinkler system was set up within the grove to maintain moisture, and there were no reports of severe damage to any named trees, including the 3,000-year-old Grizzly Giant.

"Fortunately, the Mariposa Grove has a long history of prescribed burning and studies have shown that these efforts reduce the impacts of high-severity unwanted fire," a National Park Service statement said.

A heat advisory was issued for the Central Valley sprawling below the Sierra while up in the fire area, a high temperature of 96 degrees Fahrenheit (35 degrees Celsius) was recorded for the village of Wawona, where hundreds of tourists and residents were forced to evacuate last Friday.

"Fortunately there has not been any erratic winds that have affected fire behavior," fire information officer Marc Peebles said earlier in the day. "We do have the high pressure that's over the top of the fire which is causing the increase in temperatures. However, we do get a decent amount of humidity at night which moderates fire behavior which allows our night shift firefighters to do good work."

The giant sequoias, native in only about 70 groves spread along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, were once considered impervious to flames but have become increasingly vulnerable as wildfires, fueled by a buildup of undergrowth from a century of fire suppression and the impact of drought exacerbated by climate change, have become more intense and destructive.

Lightning-sparked wildfires over the past two years have killed up to a fifth of the estimated 75,000 large sequoias, which are the biggest trees by volume and a major draw for tourists.

There was no obvious natural spark for the fire that broke out Thursday next to the park's Washburn Trail. Smoke was reported by visitors walking in the grove.

A fierce windstorm ripped through the grove more than a year ago and toppled 15 giant sequoias, along with countless other trees.

The downed trees, along with massive numbers of pines killed by bark beetles, provided ample fuel for the flames.

In Utah, smoke and ash emanating from a growing wildfire in rural Tooele County blew into Salt Lake City on Saturday. By Monday night, the Jacob City Fire had grown to 6.4 square miles (16.6 square kilometers), with 19% containment, officials said.

Elsewhere in Utah, firefighters contending with heavy winds battled the 15.9 square-mile (41-square-kilometer) Halfway Hill Fire in Filmore. Law enforcement on Saturday arrested four men who investigators said abandoned a campfire that ignited the blaze.

So far in 2022, over 35,000 wildfires have burned nearly 4.7 million acres (1.9 million hectares) in the U.S., according to the National Interagency Fire Center, well above average for both wildfires and acres burned.

## **Ancient sequoias safe for now as crews continue battling 3,200-acre Washburn fire in Yosemite**

By Hayley Smith

LA Times and other papers, Tuesday, July 12, 2022

“Increased fire activity” was expected Tuesday as crews continued to battle the 3,221-acre Washburn fire in Yosemite National Park, but officials were growing more confident that the Mariposa Grove of ancient sequoias would survive the blaze.

“Although there’s a lot of smoke with this, it seems to be progressing slowly and it seems to be doing predictable things,” U.S. Forest Service district ranger Jennifer Christie said during a community meeting late Monday night.

Nearly 700 firefighters were battling the blaze from the air and the ground, including setting backfires, laying hand lines and using bulldozers to create barriers, officials said. The fire was 22% contained Tuesday morning.

For days, all eyes had been on two high-priority areas threatened by the creeping flames: the community of Wawona, which remains under mandatory evacuation orders, and the Mariposa Grove, home to more than 500 mature sequoias, including the 3,000-year old Grizzly Giant.

There remains some cause for concern, as recent years have seen more of the ancient trees decimated by hot, fast fires fueled by climate change. Last year’s KNP Complex and Windy fires in California killed an estimated 3% to 5% of the world’s sequoias, and firefighters at the Washburn fire have set up sprinkler systems to help protect the Grizzly Giant and other at-risk trees.

But sequoias have also evolved with wildfire, and in fact rely on extreme heat to help release their seeds. Crystal Kolden, a fire scientist at UC Merced who has been tracking the blaze, said she was “not worried” about the trees in Mariposa Grove.

“They’ve been doing prescribed burns in that grove for over 50 years, and it’s early in the season yet,” Kolden said via email. “This fire should actually be pretty beneficial for them, and it is much better for them to burn in July — which is normally when most of the lightning ignitions are in Yosemite, so it’s the natural fire timing — rather than in September.”

Indeed, many fire experts in recent years have extolled the virtues of “good fire,” which can help clear the century’s worth of dead vegetation that has built up in the state’s forests due to past fire suppression policies. Forest Service spokesman Stanley Bercovitz said Yosemite has a good track record of letting fires do their natural work on the landscape, as well as a history of prescribed burns and mastication with heavy machinery.

“The nervousness and the threat level of the Mariposa Grove has dropped way down,” Bercovitz said Tuesday morning. “Fire did go through the lower portion of the grove, but it was low- and medium-intensity and the kind of fire you like.”

While it was too soon to officially declare the grove safe, he said there are early indications that most trees will survive. A younger tree, about 200 years old, may have been lost, he said, but its fate won’t be clear for some time.

But while the Washburn fire has the potential to be beneficial for the grove if current conditions hold, that doesn’t mean crews can relax. The fire grew by about 1,000 acres between Monday and Tuesday mornings, and high temperatures were expected to remain in the area through week’s end.

The fire has also given several indications of its power, including forming a massive pyrocumulus cloud on Monday signaling intense heat. Officials said the cloud was visible for miles, and areas from Sacramento to the Bay Area reported impacts from the fire’s smoke.

Additionally, the blaze was so intense that at one point a tree branch was “sent into the air from the powerful updraft produced by the fire,” the Forest Service said, and “as it dropped back to earth, it narrowly missed two firefighting aircraft.”

There are other concerns, too. While the Forest Service has yet to release the official cause of the fire, Yosemite National Park Supt. Cicely Muldoon indicated that it was not naturally caused.

“As you all know, there was no lightning on that day, so it’s a human-start fire and it’s under investigation,” she said during Monday night’s community meeting. “That’s all I can really say.”

Bercovitz said he confirmed that there were no strikes recorded on the lightning map when the fire sparked Thursday, and that there was no wind and there are no power lines in the area. But he cautioned that “human start” doesn’t necessarily mean arson, and that it’s still too soon to declare anything for certain.

“As soon as you start talking like that, it automatically points to a person, and who knows?” he said.

What was clearer was the immense value of the forestland that firefighters were working to protect.

“The Mariposa Grove was set aside in 1864 by Abraham Lincoln. It predated both the creation of Yosemite National Park and the National Park Service itself,” Muldoon said during the meeting. “It’s really the root of the whole national park system — a very important place to us, to the community.”

## **Washburn Fire update: Human activity may have sparked blaze threatening giant sequoias**

By Jordan Parker

San Francisco Chronicle, Tuesday, July 12, 2022

The wildfire burning towards the southern edge of Yosemite National Park continued growing overnight, and was measured at over 3,200 acres, officials said Tuesday morning.

The Washburn Fire has been burning for nearly a week as nearly 550 firefighters fight to protect the historic Mariposa Grove, home to more than 500 giant sequoias in the park. Crews said Tuesday they were reporting success in preventing the flames from reaching the famed trees. Officials reported the fire was 22% contained.

Lee Byer, a spokesperson for the National Park Service, described the firefight as “slow, steady and intense,” adding that, “due to the significant heavy fuels, such as large dead trees, (the fire) is creating a lot of heat and smoke.”

Several of the grove’s ancient trees, which can live for more than 2,000 years and include the popular 209-foot-tall Grizzly Giant, were hit by fire. Some were left with 70-foot-high scars on their trunks, park officials said Tuesday. But no big trees were found dead.

While there are few natural barriers to help slow the fire’s spread, burn scars from previous blazes may provide some assistance, fire officials said.

Firefighters have also deployed a sprinkler system around the sequoias, which has raised humidity in the area surrounding the trees, reducing the risk of a ground fire. Officials said structure wrap was not currently being used to protect the trees.

“Our firefighters and resource advisors have been working around the clock to prepare Mariposa Grove if the fire is to make its way in it’s direction. They are clearing fuel from around the trees, setting up sprinkler systems, and foil wrapping historic buildings within the grove to prevent any harm,” Mike Theune, a spokesperson for the park told The Chronicle Tuesday.

Theune added that park entrance gates are seeing up to 2-hour delays due to the closure of Highway 41 and asked guests to be patient with park staff. According to the park’s site visitors can use Highway 140 and 120 to access the entrances.

The Wawona Community and Wawona Campgrounds where more than 1,600 people were residing, were still under mandatory evacuation as of Tuesday morning.

The cause of the fire was still under investigation, but because there was no lightning in the area, officials have said the fire is likely to have been triggered by human activity.

Park officials expected increased fire activity over the next 72 hours, as hot and dry weather arrives to the region. Tuesday's forecast calls for gusty southwest winds up to 15 mph with temperatures reaching up to 90 degrees.

## **Yosemite Crews Deploy Sprinklers in Yosemite as Washburn Fire Grows**

Associated Press, Monday, July 11, 2022

A heat wave was developing in California on Monday but winds were light as firefighters battled a wildfire that poses a threat to a grove of giant sequoias and a small community in Yosemite National Park.

The Washburn Fire on the western flank of the Sierra Nevada had scorched about 3.6 square miles by Monday morning, an increase of about 300 acres overnight, according to an incident update.

The fire was a threat to more than 500 mature sequoias in the park's Mariposa Grove and the nearby community of Wawona, which has been evacuated.

The area in the southern portion of Yosemite was closed to visitors but the rest of the national park remained open.

Mariposa Grove and Yosemite Valley have been protected since President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation in 1864.

A sprinkler system was set up within the grove to maintain moisture, and there were no reports of severe damage to any named trees, including the 3,000-year-old Grizzly Giant.

"Fortunately, the Mariposa Grove has a long history of prescribed burning and studies have shown that these efforts reduce the impacts of high-severity unwanted fire," a National Park Service statement said.

A heat advisory was issued for the Central Valley while up in the fire area a high of 88 degrees was forecast for Wawona.

The giant sequoias, native in only about 70 groves spread along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, were once considered impervious to flames but have become increasingly vulnerable as wildfires, fueled by a buildup of undergrowth from a century of fire suppression and the impact of drought exacerbated by climate change, have become more intense and destructive.

Lightning-sparked wildfires over the past two years have killed up to a fifth of the estimated 75,000 large sequoias, which are the biggest trees by volume and a major draw for tourists.

There was no obvious natural spark for the fire that broke out Thursday next to the park's Washburn Trail. Smoke was reported by visitors walking in the grove.

A fierce windstorm ripped through the grove more than a year ago and toppled 15 giant sequoias, along with countless other trees.

The downed trees, along with massive numbers of pines killed by bark beetles, provided ample fuel for the flames.

In Utah, smoke and ash emanating from a growing wildfire in rural Tooele County blew into Salt Lake City on Saturday. By Sunday afternoon, the Jacob City Fire had grown to 5.9 square miles, with zero containment, officials said.

Elsewhere in Utah, firefighters contending with heavy winds battled the 12.4-square-mile Halfway Hill Fire in Filmore. Law enforcement on Saturday arrested four men who investigators said abandoned a campfire that ignited the blaze.

So far in 2022, over 35,000 wildfires have burned nearly 4.7 million acres in the U.S., according to the National Interagency Fire Center, well above average for both wildfires and acres burned.