

Bulldozers aid fight as Canyon Fire grows, governor declares state of emergency

By Steve E. Swenson, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Sept. 16, 2010

It is wrong to say bulldozer operator Scotty Davis of the Kern County Fire Department and his firefighter son, Tyler, saved Havilah.

But they were part of dozens of crew members, aided by helicopters and air tankers, who created a firebreak just northwest of Havilah that on Wednesday was holding the flames away from the historic, mountain community.

That was on the south central part of the 6,139-acre fire, while the same attack -- albeit with more air tankers and helicopters -- was holding the fire to the mountains above Bodfish and Myers Canyon housing areas, Kern County fire spokesman Sean Collins said.

The fire was 50 percent contained as of 7 p.m. Wednesday, according to the Kern County Fire Department website. The fire was estimated to be fully contained on Sunday.

A relatively cool day with relatively low winds, as well as backfires to broaden the firebreaks, helped nearly 1,500 firefighters and other personnel prevent any more structural damage in the blaze that began Sunday afternoon, Collins said.

Heavy winds Tuesday afternoon led to evacuations of Havilah, Myers Canyon and parts of Bodfish and a finger of the fire reached up and completely burned a house and travel trailer north of Havilah in the 4500 block of Caliente Bodfish Road, Collins said.

The home and trailer were vacant at the time and, according to a neighbor, a son of an out-of-county elderly couple who used that home was in the process of cleaning them out, Collins said. Other homes nearby the burned units were saved.

But the increased activity Tuesday led Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Wednesday to proclaim a state of emergency in Kern, unlocking state resources to help local governments fight the flames. As of Wednesday afternoon, the cost of the Canyon Fire was estimated at \$2.5 million, Collins said.

The Canyon Fire is believed to have been caused by people near the Kern River, about 1 and 1/2 miles east of Democrat Hot Springs, and the fire department is asking people who were seen taking photos from Highway 178 looking south at about 2 p.m. Sunday to send the photos to fire investigators at fireinfo@co.kern.ca.us, Collins said.

Evacuations

The flare-up Tuesday afternoon caused the required and recommended evacuations of hundreds of people, including 27 who spent Tuesday night at the Red Cross Shelter in Lake Isabella and two who stayed at a shelter in Twin Oaks, officials said.

In addition, many people stayed in the parking lot of the Lake Isabella Senior Center where the Red Cross set up cots and provided meals, shelter manager Tom Klein said. He noted that Kern County Animal Control brought portable kennels to house dogs and cats.

A community meeting was scheduled Wednesday night to update people on the fire and answer questions. Full containment is expected Sunday, Collins said.

Meanwhile, Wednesday was another smokey day in Lake Isabella and the mountains to the south and west. People all over the communities looked out their windows or sat in their front yards watching to see if the fire was heading toward them.

Helicopters dipped into the river or canals, air tankers dumped retardant, bulldozers plowed firebreaks, handcrews cut other breaks and sprayed water on hot spots, and fire equipment and crews were strategically placed along roads and hillsides in an effort to keep tabs on the blaze and respond quickly as needed.

From the fire lines

In this, Kern County's fourth major fire of the season following others near Kernville, Tehachapi and Lebec, the stories are told by those who fight the fire and experience its effects.

Wednesday morning, heavy equipment operator Scotty Davis was in a truck north of Havilah taking a break with several other firefighters from their work to create a firebreak so the blaze wouldn't reach Havilah.

He said crews plowed a 12-foot-wide break at night in steep and rough terrain above Caliente Bodfish Road. Kern County Fire Capt. Richard Grove referred to Davis as "one of the iron firefighters" -- someone who rides bulldozers on pretty treacherous slopes. "It's exhilarating," Davis said.

As he talked in the windless morning, he noted his son, Tyler, was in a crew setting backfires to broaden the break to 50 or 100 feet. He explained firefighting is a team effort, noting that on a bulldozer "our whole world is five to seven feet in front of us. It's a dust bowl. Helicopters pick the routes for us to do the work."

Less than 40 minutes later, Davis was back in a dozer securing the line as flames suddenly roared among trees and brush.

Residents reflect

About a half mile down the road toward Havilah, neighbors David Feltner and Dennis Fluhart were glad their homes were still standing and none of the four horses in a pen had been harmed.

"The fire crews are doing a bang up job," Feltner said. "I was watching all day yesterday. I wasn't concerned."

Fluhart said the home of his father, Jim Fluhart, closer to the fire was a flurry of activity Tuesday with chainsaws and tools used to create more defensible space. He said his dad has an antique firetruck with a water cannon that he had ready to defend his home. "He wasn't going to give it up," he said.

Havilah resident Barbara Dale, 73, has a family history in Havilah that dates to 1943, but she had no intention of hanging around Tuesday when she saw the fire jump the road ("the only road, Caliente Bodfish Road"). She packed up some precious pictures ("including me and my siblings in the early days when Havilah was a paradise and you saw only one or two cars a week"), medication and important papers, including tax papers ("they don't care if you are caught in a fire or not").

She said she was the first one to call the fire department about a shelter and was told about the one in Lake Isabella, but the road to it from her house was closed. So after driving about 100 miles to Highway 58, to Bakersfield and back up Highway 178 to the shelter, she learned too late another shelter had been set up in the more accessible Twin Oaks.

If she's in another evacuation, she will remember to bring a pillow, she said.

Ace Dukeshire and his wife Susan, a couple in their 70s, also were first-timers at a shelter, getting there from their Myers Canyon home. As a former woodsman from Canada, he had to help fight wildfires, he said. "It's very, very tough," he said of the job the firefighters do.

Though he didn't sleep well as he was worried about his home, he had nothing but praise for the Red Cross staff and food.

"We have been treated good," he said.

Next time, however, he said they will bring a change of clothes. He said he felt more at ease Wednesday about the safety of his home.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Wed., Sept. 15, 2010:](#)

Another study about air pollution and pesticides

by Mark Grossi

There's another ominous study out about the chemical bombardment from air pollution and pesticides on the Sierra Nevada and other natural land in California.

The message: An excess of nitrogen, a gas that's all around us on Earth, is causing overgrowth in forests and possibly damaging water quality in streams. The nitrogen is coming from ozone and pesticides.

Overgrown forests are a breeding ground for catastrophic wildfires. The streams coming out of the Sierra supply more than two-thirds of the water that Californians drink.

The excess nitrogen has been confirmed in Sequoia National Park and, to a lesser degree, Yosemite National Park.

The study is more detailed and makes more connections than previous work, but it is not a new subject or an unknown problem in the Sierra. For more background, check [this Web site](#).

This and other studies have been done by a U.S. Forest Service researcher named Mark Fenn, who has been working on this issue for many years. I'll post a PDF of the study at some point in the next few days.

In his latest study -- which will be published soon in the Journal of Environmental Management -- Fenn confirms the nitrogen from ozone and pesticides is spurring accelerated growth of exotic grasses in coastal sage scrub, pinyon-juniper and desert scrub areas.

[Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, Sept. 16, 2010:](#)

Clean streets, but dirty air

Every eight or 10 years, some sad individual at the county level sends a street sweeper to Derby Acres. If they are looking for votes, they are shooting themselves in the foot on this one. On the contrary; we wish they would be exiled to outer Siberia. All the street sweeper does is create a wall of dust. Who could possibly want that? That is as stupid as leaf blowers.

Mary Lyles, Fellows