

Firefighters warn of extreme fire danger in Fresno County foothills

By Mark Grossi, staff writer

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Nineteen of the country's best firefighters died last week in Arizona defending Yarnell, population about 700 — "where a desert breeze meets the mountain air," as the town's entrance sign reads.

It also is where urban living meets wildlands. Firefighters dig in to protect people and property in places like this all over the arid West. Sometimes, nature suddenly takes their lives.

No one remembers this kind of heartbreak over the last century along Fresno County's Highway 168 up to Shaver Lake, though the foothills are considered an extreme fire hazard. But the possibility always haunts firefighters here, particularly now in a summer following two dry winters.

The hazard surrounds the community of 650 at Shaver Lake. Could this be the fire season when people are harmed and homes are burned?

"You can't predict it," says John Mount, retired forester and author who managed Southern California Edison Co.'s forest lands around Shaver for many years. "It's driven by weather. When a fire is hot and ferocious, you can't run and you can't hide."

This is no ordinary summer in the Sierra, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire. After the consecutive dry winters and an early heat wave, fire season is settling in for a long, possibly destructive run.

There have been nearly 1,000 more fires in California this year compared to last year. The fires have burned nearly three times the acreage. In Central California, the number of fires has jumped by 64%, says Cal Fire.

Across the 4 million acres of federally managed forest lands east of Fresno, authorities are warning the public about the dry forests. The Sierra National Forest is prohibiting open-flame fires outside of designated recreation sites.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks have banned wood and barbecue fires below 6,000 feet. Yosemite National Park, farther north, has not yet started such restrictions, but it may just be a matter of time.

"We're seeing August-like conditions," said Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman. "The terrain up here is very, very dry."

A big wildfire can devour thousands of acres in a day, but size really does not matter when lives and homes are at stake. It's all about weather and location.

Last month in Mariposa County, the Carstens fire — which was started by an unattended campfire — was only about 1,700 acres, yet authorities had to evacuate 500 homes.

Nonetheless, people love living in foothill and mountain communities. Many have considered Shaver Lake a way of life for two or three generations.

"Simply put, we are drawn to the areas of magnificent beauty," said Shaver resident Lance Johnson. "But everyone living on the mountain recognizes the hazardous fire conditions surrounding us."

Overgrown vegetation and steep topography raise the hazard around homes, businesses and other buildings, says Cal Fire. In a wildfire near a community, trucks, planes and bulldozers swarm the area.

In a 1994 fire not far from Shaver Lake, people remember planes dropping fire retardant all over the small community of Big Creek. The fire had started when a squirrel shorted out an electricity transformer. Flames quickly swept uphill toward structures, but firefighters saved the town.

Fires often start in lower elevations and climb through canyons into higher elevations. Fire breaks — clearings in forest vegetation — have been created at lower elevations to protect Shaver Lake, said Cal Fire Capt. Ryan Michaels. A hot fire is supposed to die down when it doesn't have much vegetation, or fuel, to burn.

"We've had several fires test our lines below Shaver," he said. "We've been able to slow them down, so the community has not had a devastating fire. But there's always a risk with a lot of thick vegetation."

Forest overgrowth long has been recognized as the fuel source for catastrophic fires, which climb into the canopy of trees and blacken thousands of acres with breathtaking speed. The 2002 McNally fire in Sequoia and Inyo national forests burned 150,000 acres, and it's not even among the top 10 in California's recorded fire history.

Forest overgrowth is a legacy of snuffing every fire in the Sierra for decades in the 1900s before leaders realized it was a mistake. Smaller, more frequent fires are a natural, healthy part of thinning Sierra forests.

But with fire excluded for decades, millions of acres in the Sierra are now clogged with heavy growth, primed to burn during dry times.

Aside from the threat to communities such as Shaver Lake, Three Rivers, Midpines and many others, a large wildfire pours soot into the San Joaquin Valley, one of the worst-polluted air basins in the country.

Authorities regularly set prescribed fires to eliminate some heavy growth, but they must hold off on some burns when air quality is bad in the Valley.

Authorities also are trying to carefully combine fire and mechanical thinning. But forest managers generally say it is not enough to stay up with plant growth each year. The danger continues and grows.

"The sad truth is that we just have not done enough to make it safe," said retired forester Mount, who was a firefighter a half century ago. "I was overrun by a fire in 1964. People don't realize how dangerous this is."

ACE eyes fast track for extending service to Modesto, Turlock, Merced

By J.N. Sbranti, staff writer

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MODESTO — Hop aboard in downtown Modesto, kick back in comfort for two hours and arrive in the Silicon Valley in time for work.

It might not be a high-speed train, but it could be reality in five years. The Altamont Corridor Express — ACE commuter trains — wants to expand service to Modesto, Turlock and Merced.

ACE is trying to fast-track those plans, and it has lined up tax dollars to study its options and prepare the necessary environmental reports. A meeting to explain the proposal and hear concerns will be held July 24 in Modesto.

If all goes well, daily commuter train service would start in 2018 for Modesto and by 2022 for Turlock and Merced.

Federal and state funding to build the rail line will have to be arranged, but Stacey Mortensen said she's 85 percent sure it's going to work. She is the ACE executive director and she's confident public, political and financial support is lined up to make it happen.

The price tag: \$161 million to build 20.3 miles of track between Modesto and Lathrop.

That's a bargain, according to Mortensen, who compared it with the \$6 billion BART expects to spend for its 15-mile expansion from Fremont to San Jose.

The key is that the ACE tracks mostly would be built in the right of way next to the Union Pacific tracks. That route goes from Lathrop through Modesto, Turlock and Merced.

And the valley's three new train stations could be near bus transportation centers operating in those cities.

Downtown station preferred

In Modesto, the preferred station site would be near the old train depot and current city bus hub on Ninth Street between I and K streets.

"We've been talking for a long time about the need to take better advantage of our existing infrastructure," said state Sen. Cathleen Galgiani, whose 5th Senate District includes all of San Joaquin County and part of Stanislaus County. "This is a tremendous opportunity for us. This will be a huge improvement for our communities."

Galgiani helped get legislation passed that allocated \$36.4 million in state funds to study the ACE expansion. That money is coming from the voter-approved high-speed-rail bond, even though the proposed ACE train travels at regular speeds.

Galgiani said the plan is eventually to electrify the ACE system to speed up the trains, but the extension would be an interim step.

"I could certainly envision this being the first actual use of our high-speed dollars," said Galgiani, who is a Democrat and big supporter of bullet trains in California. "This would enable commuters to start receiving benefits right away."

Mortensen said the proposed ACE route could handle trains traveling up to 90 mph. She said it takes ACE trains a little more than two hours to travel the 90 miles between Stockton and San Jose, including stops at all 10 of its stations. The trip from Modesto through Lathrop to San Jose would take about the same time.

Support from Denham

Even Rep. Jeff Denham, a Republican who has been critical about how much high-speed trains could cost taxpayers, thinks expanding ACE "is a great idea."

"It's proven ridership, and it's growing," Denham said of ACE. Calling himself "a big fan of rail," Denham said the goal is to have ongoing operating expenses covered by ticket sales rather than government subsidies.

Denham, whose 10th Congressional District covers Stanislaus and southern San Joaquin counties, said he agrees that taxpayers should pay the initial rail construction costs: "Government has a responsibility to build the infrastructure, just like with highways."

ACE averages about 2,000 round-trip passengers per weekday, including about 350 commuters who live in Stanislaus County, according to Mortensen.

Its trains began running in 1998, and it now offers four round-trip trains on weekdays, with occasional special trips at other times. The double-deck trains have four to seven cars, each with up to 150 seats.

A round-trip ticket from Stockton to San Jose is \$23, but those who purchase monthly passes can lower their round-trip costs to about \$16 a day.

"It's faster than driving (during commute traffic), plus you have the ability to focus on work or make phone calls while you ride," Galgiani said. "It's a quality-of-life issue, and it's much safer to ride the train than to drive."

Unlike utilitarian BART cars, ACE trains have restrooms, drinking fountains, tables and more comfortable seating. Food and beverages are allowed aboard, and there's storage room for carry-on packages.

"It's more like a rolling living room. There's a lot of self-governance by the passengers," said Mortensen, noting how regular commuters make sure newcomers keep things tidy. "Many of them ride every day, and they've gotten to know each other. ... Some people have had the same seats for more than 10 years."

Mortensen said passengers socialize, including holding potluck meals and playing cards, having book clubs and knitting groups, and staging birthday parties and bridal showers.

Many Stanislaus residents appear anxious for the ACE extensions, at least judging by comments posted in response to questions posed by The Bee.

Bill Jones of Modesto, who is 78, said he remembers riding passenger trains as a child: "We used to be able to take the train from downtown to anywhere you wanted to go." Jones said he would use the ACE trains, especially if they connected to BART.

ACE offers shuttle buses to BART from its Pleasanton station. When BART extends to Livermore, Mortensen said, ACE is committed to offering a direct train connection to BART's station.

Connecting Modesto to mass transit such as ACE and eventually BART would stimulate the city's economy, assured Mayor Garrad Marsh. "It will bring a real vibrancy to our city center," he predicted.

City staff members have been studying downtown train service options for several years, and they envision linking ACE to Modesto's public bus system by placing the train station near the bus transit center.

"It would be a multimodal station with buses, trains and taxis all in one area to get you where you need to go," said Patrick Kelly, Modesto's planning manager.

The plan is to start with six round-trip trains through Modesto per day, then eventually increase that to 10. Kelly said adding passenger trains through downtown shouldn't clog traffic much because they would cross over city streets quickly.

"ACE trains are just a few cars long, as opposed to freight trains that can be a mile or more long," Kelley said. He said getting people out of their cars and onto trains would help reduce commuter traffic and stimulate housing construction downtown. "We believe this station will be a building block to revitalize the city ... and stimulate commerce."

It might also give freight train service a boost. Mortensen said if ACE builds its tracks from Modesto to Lathrop, it would be willing to allow short-line railroads to use the track during off times — for a fee, of course.

"That's certainly worth considering," said Ronald Jackson, president of the Modesto & Empire Traction Co. and the 2,000-acre Beard Industrial District. "If they build the track, we would be most interested in talking to them about using it so we can increase the pipeline of goods and services in and out of Modesto."

M&ET's tracks connect to the Union Pacific line in downtown Modesto, so it wouldn't be hard to connect to the ACE tracks. "It could be very appealing, and it could be good for Modesto's economy," Jackson said, especially if the new line could improve Modesto's rail access to the Port of Stockton.

Turlock, Merced officials excited

Though passenger train service to their cities would be further out, Turlock and Merced officials also are excited about ACE expanding.

"We have an old downtown train station that would be readily available for ACE," said John Bramble, Merced's city manager. Transit buses serve that station, between O and M streets off 16th Avenue, so connections would be easy.

Many Merced residents commute daily to the Bay Area, but Bramble said even more drive north to jobs in Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties. Those valley commuters might be able to take ACE to jobs in Turlock, Modesto, Lathrop, Tracy or other stops along the line.

"We're very supportive of it," Bramble said. "It will help people and help [air quality](#) by reducing the number of vehicles driving up and down Highway 99."

Turlock City Manager Roy Wasden voiced similar support, noting how the ACE station could be near the Turlock Regional Transit Center at Golden State Boulevard and Dels Lane. That's about a mile from California State University, Stanislaus, so students might be able to use the train.

"We hope it can really come to fruition," Wasden said. "A strong transit system is important to economic growth."