

Hunters fire in Mariposa County destroys 3 buildings, burns 1,300 acres

By Marc Benjamin and Ana Ibarra, staff writers

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A fast-moving brush fire in Mariposa County that destroyed three structures and blackened more than 1,300 acres near Lake McClure Tuesday has provided a sobering reminder that fire season is here -- earlier than usual.

"This is the reason we have been telling people to clear around their homes because we will have more and more of this," said Mark Johnson, interim fire chief of Cal Fire's Fresno-Kings Unit.

He added: "It's not every year we get three years in a row of drought that's preceding (the fire season)."

More than 600 firefighters have been dispatched to battle the Hunters fire, which was just 20% contained by Tuesday evening. Air tankers and helicopters are being used to attack the flames from above.

The fire, fueled by dry brush, was burning in steep terrain that crews were having difficulty reaching. Temperatures also rose into the 90s with winds up to 20 mph, adding to the challenge.

"This fire is burning like it would in summer with the dry conditions we've been experiencing," said Cal Fire spokesman Daniel Berlant.

Two homes and one outbuilding have been destroyed, officials said.

So far, five firefighters have been injured, the Cal Fire reported. Among the injuries was an inmate firefighter who cut his arm with a chain saw, Berlant said.

The fire started around 3:30 p.m. Monday in rugged terrain near Hunters Valley Access Road in the Bear Valley area. The blaze has been dubbed the Hunters fire because of its proximity to Hunters Valley Road, east of Lake McClure.

Evacuations began around 8 p.m. Monday in the Hunters Valley area. Hunters Valley Road and Cotton Creek Road are closed at Bear Valley Road.

Officials on Tuesday began urging about 50 residents in the area to evacuate.

Evacuation centers have been set up at the Mariposa Fairgrounds and at McKay Hall, 2820 Highway 140 in Catheys Valley.

Cal Fire officials said it seems most people are opting to seek shelter at the homes of friends or family members.

As of Tuesday afternoon, four people had made their way to McKay Hall.

One of the first to arrive to the shelter was Janet Kirkland. Kirkland, 69, left her house almost immediately after receiving an evacuation notice from the sheriff's department about 8 p.m. Monday.

Kirkland said she knew about the fire but did not realize how bad it had gotten until her daughter called to ask about it. "I walked outside after she called and, sure thing, there was this huge reddish, brownish, nasty-looking plume," Kirkland said.

"I almost tipped over backwards because it looked like it was right above my house, so when I was told to evacuate, I had no ifs or buts," she added.

Mona Lotspeich, 59, stayed at the Mariposa County Fairgrounds on Monday, then drove with her husband to Catheys Valley on Tuesday morning.

"We could have probably stayed at our house longer, but when you can start smelling the smoke, it's probably a good idea to leave," Lotspeich said.

She said she took only what was most valuable to her: her guitar, two dogs, one cat and one baby chick.

Her animals are being cared for at the shelter by the Fresno-based Central California Animal Disaster Team.

Naomi Flam, president and founder of the CCADT, said the team arrived at McKay Hall late Monday night to provide assistance with all the animals present.

"Animals become very stressed and protective in situations like these, especially because most are not used to being caged," Flam said, "but we're here to help people with their pets, and help the pets keep calm."

With California undergoing three straight years of drought, fire officials have been warning people to take extra care around the dry brush that covers much of the foothills.

The recent hot weather and low humidity have led to even more dangerous conditions. Though it's early in the year for wildfires, state fire officials said with the drought, wildfire season never ended last year.

Pat Gallegos, coordinator of the Highway 168 Fire Safe Council, said residents in the Fresno County foothills are vigilant about 100-foot clearance around their homes.

The one problem they do run into is conscientious property owners using their riding mowers too late in the day.

"We do have to remind people to mow before 10 a.m. while fuel moisture is high and air is cool," she said. "But I think we are pretty well prepared. There could always be an arsonist or somebody who tosses a cigarette out."