

Crews make slow progress on Yosemite fire as chance of rain rises

By Brianna Vaccari,

Fresno Bee and Modesto Bee, Tuesday, July 29, 2014

Firefighters made slow progress Monday to carve containment lines around the 2,600-acre El Portal blaze on the western edge of Yosemite National Park as thunderclouds overhead offered a hope of rain – and a threat of lightning that could make things worse.

Crews were able to build containment lines around 5 percent of the wildfire, which was ignited Saturday afternoon near the community of El Portal.

About 700 fire personnel are fighting the flames in challenging terrain. The hillsides are steep and vegetation is thick and dry, fire officials said. Smoke from the fire grew heavier Monday in Yosemite Valley.

The fire prompted officials to order evacuations in the communities of El Portal and Foresta. Three campsites, Crane Flat, Yosemite Creek and Bridalveil Creek, also were evacuated and closed. The fire destroyed one duplex in Foresta.

At a public briefing Monday evening at El Portal School, fire officials told El Portal residents they would be allowed back in their homes at 9 a.m. today.

A subtropical high-pressure system coming from Mexico shrouded the Sierra and parts of the central San Joaquin Valley in clouds, keeping temperatures cooler than expected. Fresno was expected to reach 101 on Monday, but hit just 98, about the seasonal average. Lemoore and Reedley received a trace of rain Monday morning.

The system could bring a 20 percent chance of thunderstorms to El Portal today. Rain would be helpful, but accompanying lightning could spark more fires, fire officials said.

The Sierra, including the Yosemite area, could receive anywhere from 1/4 to 1/2 inch of rain, said Jeff Barlow, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Hanford. The chance of rain jumps to 40 percent at night in the higher elevations.

But Barlow said “dry lightning” – or lightning caused by moisture arriving in an area with extremely dry air – is not likely in Yosemite. The moisture there is too deep, he said.

Temperatures in Yosemite were expected to sink to the low 70s overnight Monday, and are expected to reach the upper 90s today. Winds will be between 5 and 10 mph and could get gusty or erratic, Barlow said.

By Wednesday, the Yosemite skies are expected to clear out and make way for sunshine, he said.

Highs in the El Portal area are expected to remain near 100 at least through Friday, according to the National Weather Service forecast.

“It’s been hot, and it’s going to stay hot,” Barlow said.

The heat is relative, though, he said, since temperatures have been only 3 to 4 degrees above average.

In Yosemite National Park, employees displaced by the fire have been placed on administrative leave, according to a daily report issued by the park.

A handful of Ahwahnee Hotel employees who live in El Portal moved into temporary housing units in Yosemite Valley, said Lisa Cesaro, a spokeswoman for Delaware North Companies Parks & Resorts at Yosemite.

So far, hotel reservations have remained steady, and there haven’t been many cancellations because of the fire, she said. If there were cancellations, it was more likely guests had asthma-related concerns from the smoke in Yosemite Valley, Cesaro said.

Highway 120, or Big Oak Flat Road, is closed between Crane Flat Road and the Highway 140 junction. Highways 140 and 41, along with Tioga Road, are all open, but visitors should expect delays.

The blaze is burning south of last year's Rim fire, which seared more than 250,000 acres in and around Yosemite.

Firefighting personnel from the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service and Cal Fire are working on the El Portal fire.

Evacuation orders lifted as firefighters make progress in Sand fire

By Peter Hecht

Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, July 29, 2014

Firefighters gained the upper hand Monday on a nearly 4,000-acre wildfire in El Dorado and Amador counties, allowing a procession of displaced homeowners to return as most evacuation orders were lifted on the fire's fourth day.

People returning to the communities of Fair Play, Mount Aukum and Somerset in southern El Dorado County hauled horse trailers back on country roads. They passed signs reading, "Thank you, firefighters, for valiant efforts saving homes," and "We love our firefighters."

In the blaze that destroyed 51 structures, including 13 residences, most people could celebrate over returning to the same homes and lives they left behind.

Rick Ogden, 59, was one of those who could not. He was uncertain Monday what path to take after enduring the third devastating fire of his life.

The former Pepsi Co. salesman lost a former house to a wildfire in San Diego County in 2003. Several years later, he was recovering from heart surgery at a friend's house in Camino when it burned down due to an electrical fire.

This time, Ogden and his girlfriend, Colleen Okey, were living on "our golden years location" off of Sand Ridge Road, overlooking the middle fork of the Cosumnes River.

"The solitude was phenomenal," Ogden said. "But it could change with a blink of an eye."

On Saturday, a shift in the winds sent fire surging up to his house so quickly that Ogden had just enough time to cut open pens for the chicken and turkeys he was raising on 40 acres, allowing them to flee. His house was already aflame as Ogden and Okey drove off with their three dogs, Hannah, Jackson and Rudy.

On Monday, after Ogden and Okey stopped by the Red Cross emergency shelter at Ponderosa High School in Shingle Springs, fire officials said most of the displaced residents could return. Meanwhile, Ogden was waiting to talk to his insurance agent – and his girlfriend – about the future.

"I want to rebuild, but I'm going to have to make sure that it's good with her," Ogden said.

He got his answer minutes later.

"I'm saying 'no,'" Okey said. "Because every fire season, you're wondering if you're going to be there or not. I want to move some place that's green – but away from fire risk."

On Monday, fire officials said the risk had diminished considerably from the Sand fire. The blaze, declared 75 percent contained as of Monday evening, wasn't spreading. But fire crews, reaching nearly 2,000 personnel, were still attacking hot spots. And the blaze may not be completely extinguished until Aug. 1, officials said.

"The fire is not getting any bigger," said Ventura County Fire Capt. Ron Oatman, serving as a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. "But it's still not fully contained. Even though we don't have active flames, we have to secure the entire perimeter."

Authorities have blamed the fire, still under investigation, on a vehicle driving into brush near Sand Ridge Road and Highway 49. The brush was believed to have caught fire, engulfing the vehicle in flames as the blaze spread. No injury was reported.

"The vehicle was driving in an area where it shouldn't have been," said Cal Fire spokeswoman Lynne Tolmachoff. "Driving into tall dry grass with a vehicle whose exhaust system is super hot is going to light something on fire."

Patrick Sutter, 48, was told Monday that he and his family could return to their house in Mount Aukum. His family had placed their horses and goat in a trailer and fled the fire Saturday as burning debris rained down on them.

The first night at the Red Cross shelter, Sutter, a former Marine used to such accommodations, slept on a cot in fits and starts. "I was having flashbacks of waiting for my sergeant coming through the door and throwing down trash cans and yelling," he said.

After a restful sleep the second night, he awoke to the news he wanted to hear.

"I get to go home. I feel good," Sutter said.

Red Cross spokeswoman Melissa Webber said 13 stranded residents stayed at the shelter Sunday night and dozens more came for morning breakfast offerings of biscuits and gravy, scrambled eggs, pancakes, yogurt, bagels and juice. "It seems that people's spirits are lifting in hopes that they can return soon," Webber said.

Doc Bassett was still in limbo. A Cal Fire official informed the gathering that people living east of Mount Aukum Road could return to their homes. Bassett lives just to the west.

He felt let down when a fire official, marking areas on a map where people could go back, then "pointed exactly where our house was – and said, 'no.'"

So he sat in the hot sun and waited with his "other half" – a tiny dog named Sofie. Bassett said he considered sneaking in on some back roads to his house but abandoned the idea.

"We got our hopes up," he said. "But we decided to be good, law-abiding citizens."

Meanwhile, Ogden and Okey had taken advantage of an offer from a neighbor with a house near the Red Cross shelter. The neighbor agreed to host Ogden and Okey in a fifth-wheel trailer while the couple ponders where they'll live next.

Though their house was destroyed, they did get some good news Monday: The turkeys and chickens that Ogden had freed from their pens had largely flown or waddled to safety. A neighbor was providing them feed and water.

California wildfire claims 6 more homes

Associated Press

The Porterville Recorder, Tuesday, July 29, 2014

SHINGLE SPRINGS, Calif. (AP) — Fire officials say crews found six more homes destroyed by a Northern California wildfire that led to evacuation orders for about 1,200 people before it was brought under control.

Nineteen homes and 48 outbuildings were determined to have been destroyed by the Sand Fire in the Sierra Nevada foothills east of Sacramento.

The fire was 80 percent contained as of Tuesday morning and holding at a little under 6 square miles. Most of the evacuees were allowed to return home a day earlier.

State fire Battalion Chief Scott McLean says the continued progress against the fire has allowed officials to begin dispatching crews to other blazes. The fire is expected to be fully contained Friday.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. Check back soon for further information. AP's earlier story is below.

Most of the 1,200 people driven to evacuate by a Northern California wildfire that destroyed 13 homes have been told they can safely return after a series of steady gains in the firefight.

The evacuees included Fred and Carolyn Shults, who had to flee the wildfire in the Sierra Nevada foothills east of Sacramento when billowing flames bore down on them.

On Monday at a Red Cross shelter, they hugged friends and neighbors when they heard from a firefighter friend that their home was still standing.

It was a welcome change from the weekend, when Caroline Shults scrolled through photos of the fire on her phone, hoping she wouldn't see her 100 apple trees or her home.

The couple has been wildfire conscious after several scares, ensuring they cleared vegetation. But the Sand fire, which officials trace to a hot car in dry grass, reminded them of the limits of preparation.

"Wildfires are so uncontrollable, and people can start them so easily without knowing what they're doing," said Fred Shults.

They also didn't anticipate how quickly they would have to evacuate, vowing to keep a list of items to leave with next time.

Laurel Fulton, a 66-year-old fellow evacuee, knows that lesson well after leaving behind an obstinate horse.

"When the sheriff is banging on your window yelling 'Get out now, get out now,' you don't have much of a choice," Fulton said.

Fulton also said the fire was so hot and so fast the sand along a nearby river had burned to glass and she saw ashes the size of dollar bills. She also managed to rescue 4 dogs, a cat and her other horse. She said her neighbor stayed behind and has been reporting that her horse is OK.

Only a small number of evacuees in roughly a square mile patch of land remained out their homes.

Crews held the fire to a little under 6 square miles, increasing containment to 75 percent Monday, state fire Battalion Chief Scott McLean said.

"We're not going to get complacent, but it's looking very good," McLean said.

A private drone trying to record footage of the fire nearly hindered efforts to attack the flames from the air Monday, state fire officials said. The man controlling the drone was told to stop it because of the potential danger to firefighting planes. He was not cited.

The fire has destroyed 13 homes and 38 other structures near wine-growing regions in Amador and El Dorado counties since it started Friday.

Another fire about 100 miles away had burned through a little more than 4 square miles of brush and trees in Yosemite National Park, the neighboring Stanislaus National Forest and private land Monday and was sending smoke into Yosemite's famed valley.

It was 5 percent contained after destroying one home.

An estimated 100 homes in Foresta and the small community of Old El Portal remained under evacuation.