

Yosemite officials update fire spread to 4,500 acres, 5% containment

By Andrea Castillo

The Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2014

A Yosemite National Park fire that started Sunday has burned almost 4,500 acres and is about 5% contained, officials said Tuesday.

The fire has spread quickly and in multiple directions. Eight helicopters and 327 firefighters are helping suppress the flames, including crews from the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service. The effort has cost \$100,000 to date.

Park officials are still investigating the high-elevation wilderness fire's cause. They think it is a spot fire from a lightning-caused burn, dubbed the Meadow fire, which started in mid-July.

Around 185 hikers were evacuated by helicopter on Sunday night, including 85 from the Half Dome summit and 100 from trails and campgrounds in Little Yosemite Valley, where the fire spread to both sides of the Merced River between Half Dome and Mt. Starr King.

Officials previously estimated the damage at nearly 2,600 acres. Park Ranger Ashley Mayer said fire surveyors used infrared mapping Monday night to get a more accurate picture of the affected area. As a result, she said, not all of the 1,900-acre increase can be attributed to the fire's spread.

Additionally, Mayer said, there are granite outcroppings within the 4,500 affected acres, so most but not all of the damage is burnt trees. She said firefighters are using natural barriers such as granite rocks to contain the blaze, instead of removing trees and creating a containment line.

"We want to leave that wilderness area in its natural state," she said.

Mayer said the weather in Yosemite Valley is warm but not too windy. The National Weather Service forecast shows Wednesday could get slightly warmer, with a high of 84 degrees and wind gusts as high as 15 mph.

More smoke crept into the valley on Tuesday than was apparent on Monday. Mayer said visitors should expect to continue seeing smoke in the coming days.

Several trails and camps are closed until further notice, including:

- Little Yosemite Valley
- John Muir Trail between Little Yosemite Valley and Long Meadow
- All routes on Half Dome, including the cables, NW Regular Route and Snake Dike
- Sunrise and Merced Lake high sierra camps and backpackers' camps
- Sunrise Trail south of the Tenaya Lake Trail junction
- Clouds Rest, Sunrise Lakes, Emeric Lake and Babcock Lake
- Bridalveil Creek Campground (to house firefighters)

Trails and camps in the area that remain open include:

- Mist, John Muir and Panorama trails to the top of Nevada Fall
- Vogelsang Backpackers' Camp
- Tenaya Lake Trail
- Fletcher Creek Trail between Vogelsang and Merced Lake Ranger Station

All park roads, entrance stations, and facilities are open. Park officials said visitors should check the park's website to get updated air quality information.

Bridge fire 85 percent contained

By Sun-Star staff

The Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2014

A vehicle apparently sparked the 300-acre blaze near the Ponderosa Basin area of Mariposa County, the state Department of Fire and Forestry Protection said Tuesday.

The wildfire erupted Friday afternoon near the William Sell Bridge over the Chowchilla River Canyon – about a 15-minute drive northwest of Oakhurst – forcing numerous road closures and evacuations from more than 700 homes.

The fire was about 85 percent contained Tuesday, with full containment expected sometime Thursday, according to Cal Fire.

“Areas outside the control lines will be closely monitored for any new spot fires. The crews will continue mopping up and looking for hot spots within containment lines,” Cal Fire said in a news release. “Interior portions of the fire will continue to burn and may produce smoke.”

Two firefighters have suffered unspecified minor injuries battling the flames, Cal Fire spokeswoman Karen Guillemin-Kanawyer reported.

Officials with Cal Fire, Mariposa County Fire Department, Mariposa County Sheriff’s Department and the California Highway Patrol are coordinating efforts to combat the fire.

Guillemin-Kanawyer said she could not say exactly how a vehicle caused the fire but that the blaze is not considered suspicious. She did say hot vehicles parked on the side of a road in tall, dry grass is “a common cause” of wildfires in dry conditions.

“We’re really urging the public to be cautious any time they use any equipment that heats up or that can spark,” Guillemin-Kanawyer said. “It’s still very hot, it’s still very dry and the probability of ignition is still very high around dry vegetation.”

Guillemin-Kanawyer said fire danger is not limited to wildland areas, but can cause problems in cities as well. “Vacant lots, vacant buildings are also very dry and can ignite,” she said. “That’s why we’re really emphasizing caution when using equipment. One less spark is one less fire.”

NASA image shows extent of Yosemite fire's smoke plume

By Veronica Rocha

Los Angeles Times, Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2014

A new NASA satellite image of Yosemite National Park shows a massive tower of smoke billowing up and fanning out from a wildfire that has so far burned thousands of acres and closed off access to Half Dome.

The high-resolution image of the Meadow fire was captured Sept. 7 from the Aqua satellite orbiting 450 miles overhead.

Smoke can be seen billowing over and into Yosemite Valley, just 5 miles east of the park, for the first time since the blaze started to rapidly spread across dry wilderness.

NASA said the red outline in the image depicts "unusually warm land surface temperatures" often associated with fires -- essentially the perimeter of the blaze.

As of Tuesday, the Meadow fire had charred 4,400 acres. Nearly 100 hikers and campers had to be evacuated Monday, many of them by helicopter off Half Dome, as the fire spread, cutting off exit routes.

More than 300 firefighters were battling the blaze, which has forced park officials to shut down access to the popular Half Dome peak.

In addition to trails near Half Dome, those in Little Yosemite Valley, Merced Lake, the Sunrise High Sierra Camps, Clouds Rest and Echo Valley also remained closed.

The fire is thought to have been started by one of hundreds of lightning strikes last month, but did not explode in size until Sunday under strong winds. Cooler temperatures and moisture from the remnants of Hurricane Norbert, however, were expected to provide some relief to firefighters.

Yosemite wildfire closes popular Half Dome peak through Thursday

By Joseph Serna

Los Angeles Times, Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2014

A wildfire burning in Yosemite National Park will shut down access to the iconic Half Dome peak through at least Thursday, closing off one of the most coveted and exclusive trails in the park, officials announced.

Access to the 8,800-foot peak will be re-evaluated later in the week as firefighters take advantage of less windy conditions and the park's natural granite barriers.

"If we get no winds, we'll be in good shape," said park spokesman Scott Gediman.

The Meadow fire has burned 4,400 acres and was just 5% contained Tuesday morning, Gediman said. More than 300 firefighters were battling the blaze, which exploded on Sunday amid strong winds, stranding nearly 100 hikers and campers and closing Little Yosemite Valley.

Gediman said officials chose to shut down access to Half Dome as a precautionary measure as the fire crawls toward Tuolumne Meadows.

Thousands annually vie for the 225 day permits and 75 backpacking permits issued to climb Half Dome daily – a trek that includes negotiating steel cables fitted into the dome's vertical granite slabs where wooden slats and the rock provide the only footing. There's also a daily lottery for an extra 50 permits.

Those whose permits are affected by the closure will be issued refunds, officials said.

In addition to trails near Half Dome, those in Little Yosemite Valley, Merced Lake, the Sunrise High Sierra Camps, Clouds Rest and Echo Valley also remained closed.

The fire, believed to have been started by one of hundreds of lightning strikes last month, had been smoldering for 49 days at just under 20 acres. Park officials had been letting it burn to restore the area's natural fire patterns. Given its high elevation (8,000 feet) and slow pace, there was no threat to public safety, officials said.

Rachael Kirk, 26, of Oakland, told Fox News that she and two friends were about 400 feet below the Half Dome summit when the fire started to roar behind them. She said a park employee insisted they climb the board-and-cable stairway up to the summit -- the only place the helicopter could land.

"That was the moment everyone felt scared," she said.

Tim Ludington, a park spokesman, told The Times that the decision to evacuate the hikers by air was the safest option.

"The fire was getting very close to the trail to Half Dome and we didn't want to take the chance on people having to hike through the fire to get back," he said.

A burst of cooler temperatures and moisture from the remnants of Hurricane Norbert were expected to provide some relief to firefighters as the weather system moved across the state.