

Crews on Willow fire brace for hot, dry, windy weather

By Nicole Santos

Fresno Bee, Monday, July 27, 2015

Crews battling the Willow fire near Bass Lake got a break Monday as the fire's growth slowed, but the break may not last long.

Daytime temperatures near Bass Lake are expected to climb into the upper 90s, and that could dry out brush and bring flame-stoking winds that could challenge firefighters trying to contain the blaze.

"With the expected heat that's coming with the weather system, in the next 24 to 48 hours, it's going to be critical for fire crews on the ground," said Raj Singh, spokesman for the Forest Service's South Central Sierra incident management. "With that much heat, the high temperatures are going to drop the relative humidity into the single digits, which is critical for fire behavior and with that usually comes strong winds."

Singh said another concern is the heat on the firefighters.

"They're in rough, steep terrain doing a lot of hiking. All these men and women are professionals, so they know what they are doing and they just have to take more breaks and make that conscious effort to stay hydrated," Singh said. "Supervisors need to make that conscious effort to be more vigilant with their crew to avoid heat stroke, dehydration and other heat emergencies."

The pace of the Willow fire slowed from Sunday, when it exploded from just 200 acres. It is now estimated to have scorched more than 1,500 acres and was 5% contained, with no damage to structures, houses or outbuildings. Road 274, the main roadway between North Fork and Bass Lake, reopened Monday.

The blaze is heading northeast and southeast and is burning away from Bass Lake and Central Camp, a private community within Sierra National Forest that is under mandatory evacuation, said Singh.

The Willow fire threatens around 450 structures near Bass Lake and North Fork.

Madera County law enforcement issued a pre-evacuation notice Monday to residents in Cascadel Woods, alerting them to gather their belongings and be prepared to leave.

Cascadel Woods resident Forrest Negrete, 35, said the initial scare for residents came Saturday. Most people were unconcerned because the fire was moving away from them, he said.

Negrete also isn't worried about the fire because he has fire insurance and he's had a mental list of the items he would want to take, like his pets, in case of evacuation.

Huron Mission Church pastor Andrew Padilla, a resident of Coarsegold, was driving on Road 274 with his 14-year-old grandson, Jonathan Padilla, to the North Fork recycling center when Jonathan asked if they could pull over to view the fire.

Jonathan said he's seen fires the size of the Willow fire only in pictures and on the news, but never close up.

"I'm still speechless that this is even happening," Jonathan said. "I think the helicopters are pretty cool and I'm thankful they are doing all they can to stop the fire."

His grandfather told him a story of a huge fire in Yosemite National Park that occurred years ago. The fire was so big that the firefighters had to let it burn itself out.

"I'm just hoping this doesn't become one of those (fires)," Jonathan said.

Padilla said the fire is going to scare wild animals — including cougars, bears and wild pigs — out of the forest and near populated areas. He recalled the same thing happened during the 2001 North Fork fire.

More than 1,200 firefighters from around the state have arrived to battle the fire, which began on Saturday.

Franny Adams, fire patrol for Sierra National Forest, is stationed in North Fork. She said there's lots of manzanita brush as well as ponderosa and sugar pines that have burned because of the fire. Remains from trees and brush that were damaged by the 2001 fire are also on fire.

Adams said if there's heavy rainfall this winter, mudslides could result because of the lack of vegetation in the burn area.

Smoke from the fire led the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a caution for residents living in eastern areas of Fresno, Madera and Merced counties.

Residents can go to www.valleyair.org/wildfires for information about any current wildfires. Residents can also check the air monitor closest to their location to determine localized air quality conditions. Visit the Real-time Air Advisory Network page on the district's website to subscribe for free: www.valleyair.org/RAAN.

The Valley and mountain areas alike will face a heat wave starting Tuesday. The National Weather Service said high pressure building from the desert southwest will mean clear, hot conditions across the region.

The high in Fresno Tuesday is forecast to be 97 degrees, rising to 103 on Wednesday and staying above 100 until Saturday.

Oakhurst will be just a few degrees cooler, meaning hot temperatures that make firefighting more difficult.

A flow of monsoon moisture will come over the Sierra and into the Valley by the end of the week, cooling down high temperatures a bit but increasing humidity and the chance for thunderstorms, the weather service said.

Willow fire prompts health caution in Merced

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, July 28, 2015

The Willow fire burning near Bass Lake in Madera County prompted air officials to issue a health warning in the eastern areas of Merced, Madera and Fresno counties.

The caution will be in place until the fire is extinguished, officials said. The fire has grown to more than 1,500 acres and was only 5 percent contained as of Monday.

Smoke from fires produces fine-particulate matter, which can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said in a news release.

Where conditions warrant, people with heart or lung disease should follow their doctor's instructions for dealing with episodes of particulate exposure, officials advised.

Older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure.

To see if the wildfire is impacting their area, residents can check the district's wildfire page at www.valleyair.org/wildfires.htm.