

Fire in Golden Trout Wilderness rages on

Porterville Recorder, Friday, July 31, 2015

Hikers, campers and fishing enthusiasts hoping to enjoy the Golden Trout Wilderness this weekend may need to alter their plans.

“We are going to have to close a portion of the Golden Trout Wilderness,” said Denise Alonzo, public information officer for the Western Divide Ranger District of Sequoia National Forest/Giant Sequoia National Monument. “People going into the backcountry need to check with us.”

The Cabin Fire, ignited by lightning the weekend of July 18-19, burned beyond containment lines in the Golden Trout Wilderness on Wednesday. The fire is east of Mountain Home State Demonstration Forest, but is not a threat to the popular park.

The blaze was an estimated 1900 acres as of 8 p.m. Thursday. It had grown substantially since it was discovered rekindled on Wednesday afternoon. Officials are expecting growth into the weekend unless weather conditions change.

Gaining access to the fire has been difficult. Smoke over the impacted area had until Thursday morning prevented aircraft from flying over the fire to check for overnight growth.

However, once the smoke inversion lifted, aircraft were able to evaluate the conditions and begin planning suppression efforts. Crews numbering 150 firefighters were flown in shortly afterward on Thursday.

As of Thursday afternoon, smoke can still be seen from the Valley floor as it continues to drift into nearby communities. Local air quality officials issued a cautionary statement for the areas impacted, warning of health issues that could arise.

“It [the air quality] might be a little worse,” said Heather Heinks, outreach and communications manager for The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. “There’s some haze, but our monitors aren’t currently picking up a significant amount [of airborne particulates], yet.”

Currently, smoke impacts are concentrated in the mountainous and foothill areas of the air basin, but still remain possible on the Valley floor until the fires are extinguished.

Smoke from fires produces fine-particulate matter — PM2.5 — which can cause serious health problems including lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and strokes.

The particles are so small that when they gain access to the lungs they almost instantly enter the bloodstream. People with respiratory conditions, young children and elderly people are especially susceptible to these pollutants.

“Wildfires are localized impacts,” said Heinks. “People need to take caution.”

As of Thursday afternoon, there were no trail or road closures in the Western Divide Ranger District. Visitors are advised to call to check conditions and obtain weather forecasts prior to travel in the mountains. Call 539-2607 Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. for the latest fire and weather updates.

While thunderstorms with dry lightning are predicted over the next few days, two previously burned areas should help slow the growth of the Cabin Fire. The Lion Fire in 2011 was located north of the Cabin Fire, while the Soda Fire in 2014 was located to the south.

California ablaze as wildfires wreak havoc

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, July 31, 2015

The West is on fire. Rural lands from Alaska to California — hundreds of thousands of acres all told — are ablaze today. The 2015 wildfire season, fed by high temperatures, low snowpack and continued drought, has set the stage for one of the earliest and most prolific fire seasons on record. As of mid-week, 34,995 large fires had burned over 5,569,671 acres in 2015 — almost 2 million acres above the 10-year average.

In the western Sierras of Central California, residents of the Cascadel Woods community east of North Fork were ordered Thursday morning to evacuate because of the advance of the Willow fire, which has grown to more than 3,000 acres, the Fresno Bee reported.

At least one family was already gone. Dakota Johnson, 18, her grandmother Juanita Williams and cousin Alexis Bates got a head start after hearing Wednesday night that an evacuation was likely. They were already at the Oakhurst Red Cross shelter Wednesday evening.

"We could see black smoke rising and my grandma didn't want to wait until the last minute to leave," Johnson said. "We could also see helicopters flying over our house and heard lots of sirens. A little further down, at my cousin's house, they could see flames."

Williams said her home in North Fork Rancheria is the last one on Mission Drive. The family car is broken down, so they caught a ride out.

Johnson said the Red Cross staff has been very helpful in providing them with food and water, and she has been monitoring the Willow fire on her social media hoping firefighters get the fire out fast.

Incident commanders said firefighters are focused on establishing a perimeter near the 2001 North Fork fire to protect Cascadel Woods, southeast of where the fire started, east of Bass Lake.

Madera County Sheriff's Lt. Bill Ward said the mandatory evacuation in the Cascadel Woods community includes all residences off of Road 233, Mission Drive, Peckinpah Acres Drive and Cascadel Woods subdivision.

Also, the Douglas Ranger Station Road mandatory evacuation has been expanded to include the remainder of Douglas Ranger Station Road, Trails End Road, Wild Rose Lane and Elderberry Road.

The American Red Cross evacuation center is at the Oakhurst Community Center, 39800 Road 425B. The shelter's manager, Sandy Morehouse, said 16 people had arrived by noon Thursday with more expected. The Central California Animal Disaster Team shelter at the community center received two pets Thursday morning.

The Willow fire grew by a third as it pushed through a large granite face on its northern side, federal officials said Thursday morning.

U.S. Forest Service spokesman Cody Norris said the fire is active on the northern, southeast and eastern fronts; firefighters on the west side have good containment.

There are no reported heat-related injuries, no fatalities and still no damage to structures, homes or outbuildings, he said.

Smoke from the Willow fire is wafting into the central San Joaquin Valley, and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has issued a health warning for residents with particular medical conditions who might be affected by it.

Things were just as dire in Northern California, where 14 large blazes continue to scorch the drought-plagued state, USA Today reported.

The Rocky Fire in Lake County, about 130 miles north of San Francisco, caused at least 500 people to flee, KXTV reported. The blaze had spread to 12 square miles and was not contained as of Thursday morning. The fire is burning heavy brush and timber and access to the flames is difficult, according to CAL FIRE, the state firefighting agency.

Nearly 7,000 firefighters were battling at least 14 blazes across the state, CAL FIRE spokesman Daniel Berlant said Thursday. Most of the fires were in the northern part of California, including the Wragg Fire in Napa Valley (which is 80 percent contained) and the Lowell Fire near the Sierra (60 percent contained).

Flames burning through more than 12 square miles of rugged rural territory southeast of Clearlake, destroying three homes, and forcing evacuations from Lower Lake east to Napa County, Cal Fire officials told the Santa Rosa Press Democrat.

Firefighters had not yet gained any amount of containment around the fire, and crews battled throughout the night with only slight relief from the heat and no help from fog, which never arrived, Cal Fire spokeswoman Suzie Blankenship said. The area is rugged, with steep canyons and pockets of timber.

“The fire grew at a rapid rate of spread, and it’s dry out there, those fuels haven’t had their normal weather patterns in the winter for four-to-five years,” Blankenship said. “The fire just really grew.”

Named the Rocky fire for its proximity to the Rocky Creek just north of Morgan Valley Road, the fire started at about 3:30 p.m. Wednesday in heavy brush and timberland about eight miles east of Lower Lake.

The Rocky fire had torched at least 8,300 acres by Thursday morning in eastern Lake County, making it the largest active fire in Northern California and second only to a 31,500-acre in Southern California that was almost completely contained.

Mandatory orders to evacuate had expanded by Thursday morning, stretching from a neighborhood on the eastern edge of Lower Lake and east along rural roads crisscrossing a swath of steep terrain and rolling ranch lands to Knoxville Road in Napa County.

Cal Fire estimated at least 500 residents were affected by the evacuation orders late Wednesday, and an updated number wasn’t yet available Thursday.

A total of 630 fire personnel were working the blaze Thursday, with eight air tankers and 11 helicopters making drops. Firefighters were facing another scorching, dry day, with temperatures forecast to hit 103 degrees in Lower Lake, according to the National Weather Service.

Some relief with slightly cooler temperatures and increased humidity were expected to start Friday and continue through Monday, meteorologist Eric Kurth told the Press Democrat.

Stanislaus crews help battle California wildfires

Modesto Bee, Friday, July 31, 2015

As nearly 7,000 firefighters battled 14 large wildfires burning in California, Stanislaus County had personnel involved in four of the efforts Thursday.

On Wednesday night, two Type 3 wildland engines were sent to Tuolumne County as part of a strike team to fight the Big Creek fire off Highway 120 and Sprague Road near Groveland, said Stanislaus County Deputy Fire Warden Eric Holly.

An 8:30 p.m. Thursday update from the California Department of Forestry & Fire Protection put the blaze at 204 acres, with 35 percent containment. A voluntary evacuation, which was in effect Wednesday night and Thursday, was lifted at 6 p.m.

The two Stanislaus County engines – one from the Stanislaus Consolidated Fire Protection District, the other from Burbank Paradise Fire District – joined one engine from San Joaquin County and two from El Dorado County. The strike team leader is from the Salida Fire Protection District, Holly said, and the strike team leader trainee is from Stanislaus Consolidated.

“The surrounding drought-stressed forest with its thousands of dead trees has created an unprecedented danger to firefighters and residents alike,” CalFires incident update said. “Frequent spot fires across the line into this dense, dry, heavy timber are major challenges, raising the possibility of steadily worsening fire activity. Power lines in the area have been de-energized at CalFires’s request to protect firefighter safety.”

No structures have been destroyed and no one has been injured in the Big Creek fire, the cause of which is under investigation.

Stanislaus County also has personnel at the 8,051-acre Wragg fire in Napa and Solano counties, the 2,300-acre Lowell fire in Nevada and Placer counties, and the nearly 4,394-acre Willow fire in Mariposa County, Holly said.

Wildfire activity increased significantly in Northern California on Wednesday afternoon and evening because of triple-digit temperatures and gusty winds, said Daniel Berlant, a spokesman for Cal Fire. "While firefighters worked tirelessly containing over three dozen new wildfires, the windy conditions allowed five new large fires to grow rapidly," he said in a news release Thursday morning.

Thursday's weather conditions are much the same as Wednesday's, "which will result in fire danger again being elevated," Berlant said.

To the Wragg fire, the Modesto Fire Department sent one fire line paramedic. That fire, which has burned for more than a week, has charred more than 11 square miles in Solano County. It jumped the containment line Tuesday in rugged, steep terrain baked by triple-digit temperatures. "We're optimistic that we are able to stop and hold it," said Berlant.

At least 136 structures had been threatened. However, evacuation orders and advisories were lifted at 6 p.m.. One residence and three outbuildings were damaged, and two outbuildings were destroyed. The Wragg fire was 87 percent contained as of Friday morning. Full containment is expected Aug. 3.

At the Lowell fire, which was 75 percent contained as of 7:30 a.m. Friday, Modesto fire has contributed a fire line paramedic. Two Type 3 wildland engines – one from Stanislaus Consolidated, the other from the Turlock Rural Fire Department – are part of a strike team that includes three engines from Tuolumne County. The strike team's leader trainee is from Stanislaus Consolidated. Also at the Lowell fire, a Tahoe Basin strike team includes a leader trainee from the Patterson Fire Department.

All Lowell fire evacuations have been downgraded to advisories. One structure has been destroyed and 54 are threatened. Six firefighters have been injured, including one who remains hospitalized with serious burns. Full containment is expected Aug. 3.

At the Willow fire, Stanislaus County has a public information officer. Residents in the community of Cascadel Woods north of Fresno were evacuated because of the blaze. It was 30 percent contained as of Friday morning.

Authorities say a boy acknowledged starting the fire by playing with a lighter to burn pine needles. The boy faces criminal charges but remains out of custody because he and his family are cooperating, officials say.

The Willow fire and the Cabin fire in Tulare County have prompted the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to issue a health alert about smoke impact throughout the eight-county air basin that includes Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Merced counties. Thursday, smoke impact was concentrated in the mountainous and foothill areas, but poor air on the Valley floor is possible until the fires are extinguished.

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. Residents can check the district's wildfire page at www.valleyair.org/wildfires for information about any current wildfires and whether they are impacting the Valley.

Stanislaus County agencies currently have no personnel committed to other wildfires, Holly said, and it's difficult to predict what lies ahead. That depends on the type of equipment needed. Right now, the need is for Type 3 wildland engines, he said. Stanislaus County has some available, but will decide on a case-by-case basis whether it can send them out, he said, because the top priority is ensuring sufficient equipment remains here for local protection.

The biggest challenge for firefighters in California is a fast-spreading Rocky Fire in Lake County, 130 miles north of San Francisco. The fire started Wednesday and within hours destroyed two homes and charred more than 12 square miles.

At least 500 residents were chased from their homes as the blaze raged in hills covered in dense brush and oak trees and dotted with ranch homes. The fire is burning near Lower Lake, south of Clear Lake, a popular summer recreation spot.

As of 8:15 p.m. Thursday, 10,200 acres had burned and it was only 5 percent contained.

For fire updates, go to www.fire.ca.gov/index.php and click on "Incident Information."

Wildfire smoke masks available

Sierra Star, Thursday, July 30, 2015

With the air quality as quickly as the Willow Fire is spreading, wildfire smoke masks are available at the Sierra Star, Coarsegold Pharmacy, True Value in Oakhurst, Sierra Telephone, Madera County Fire Station 12 in Oakhurst, North Fork Market, and the Madera County Sheriff's Department.

Air officials have issued a health cautionary statement for smoke impacts in the eastern areas of Merced, Madera, and Fresno counties. The caution is in place until the Willow Fire is extinguished.

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. Where conditions warrant, people with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of particulate exposure.

Additionally, older adults and children should avoid prolonged exposure or heavy exertion, depending on their local conditions.

Residents can check the district's wildfire page - valleyair.org/wildfires.htm - for information about any current wildfires. Residents can also check the nearest air monitor 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.

Details: valleyair.org, Fresno office, (559) 230-6000.

Willow Fire, other blazes polluting Valley air

Handford Sentinel, Thursday, July 30, 2015

FRESNO -- The Willow Fire burning near Bass Lake and other fires in central California are fouling San Joaquin Valley air, creating health hazards for residents, according to a press release Thursday from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The district has issued a cautionary statement from all eight counties under its jurisdiction, including Kings.

Smoke impacts are concentrated in the foothills and mountains, but smoke also blows down into the Valley.

Smoke includes fine particles that can contribute to lung disease, asthma attacks and increased risk of heart attacks and stroke. People with respiratory conditions are urged to follow their doctors' orders when exposed to fire emissions.

People can go to www.valleyair.org/wildfires for updates. Willow Fire updates are available at <http://1.usa.gov/1MApVIx>

Cascadel Woods evacuation ordered as Willow fire grows

By Nicole Santos

The Fresno Bee, Thursday, July 30, 2015

A wildfire near Bass Lake grew by a third as it pushed through a large granite face on its northern side, federal officials said Thursday morning.

The expansion of the Willow Fire led to a mandatory evacuation Thursday morning of the Cascadel Woods community east of North Fork because of the advance of the Willow fire, which has grown to nearly 4,000 acres.

At least one family was already gone.

Dakota Johnson, 18, her grandmother Juanita Williams and cousin Alexis Bates got a head start after hearing Wednesday night that an evacuation was likely. They were already at the Oakhurst Red Cross shelter Wednesday evening.

"We could see black smoke rising and my grandma didn't want to wait until the last minute to leave," Johnson said. "We could also see helicopters flying over our house and heard lots of sirens. A little further down, at my cousin's house, they could see flames."

Williams said her home in North Fork Rancheria is the last one on Mission Drive. The family car is broken down, so they caught a ride out.

Johnson said family members started gathering key items as soon as they heard the pre-evacuation notice: "We made sure to grab important documents, like birth certificates, pictures, clothes and our two Chihuahuas."

Johnson, a recent graduate of Minarets High School in North Fork, made sure to grab her class schedule because she starts school in August at Fresno City College.

She said the Red Cross staff has been very helpful in providing them with food and water, and she has been monitoring the Willow fire on social media, hoping firefighters get the fire out fast.

"I thought the fire was pretty far from our home but when I saw the map it looks far, but it's actually really close," Johnson said. "I hope to go home soon."

Incident commanders said firefighters are focused on establishing a perimeter near the 2001 North Fork fire to protect Cascadel Woods, southeast of where the fire started, east of Bass Lake.

Evacuation details

Madera County Sheriff's Lt. Bill Ward said the mandatory evacuation in the Cascadel Woods community includes all residences off of Road 233, Mission Drive, Peckinpah Acres Drive and the subdivision.

Also, the Douglas Ranger Station Road mandatory evacuation has been expanded to include the remainder of Douglas Ranger Station Road, Trails End Road, Wild Rose Lane and Elderberry Road.

The American Red Cross evacuation center is at the Oakhurst Community Center, 39800 Road 425B. The shelter's manager, Sandy Morehouse, said 16 people had arrived by noon Thursday with more expected. The Central California Animal Disaster Team shelter at the community center received two pets Thursday morning.

North Fork resident Peter Matthews, 30, his mother Angelina Matthews and their dog Piper were among those at the shelter. Peter Matthews said they live about 200 yards from Cascadel Woods and had been ready to evacuate since Sunday. At 8 a.m. Thursday, a sheriff's deputy came to the house and said, "It's time to go!"

Matthews said the fire was intense late Wednesday night: "I was watching inferno flames, mostly red and orange, that were at least 300 feet tall and less than a quarter mile from my driveway." He said that as he prepared to evacuate Thursday morning, the smoke made it hard to breathe and his car had a quarter-inch layer of ash on it.

"And I left my car window down in the back so I had a little bit of ash inside, too. What made things worse, I left my lights on and I had to put the charger on my battery. It was pretty crazy because firefighters were driving by my street, wondering if I was going to get out because I had the charger on my car."

On top of essentials, Matthews hauled out his DVD collection stand and television. "As close as the fire is and with how big the flames are, I'm actually not expecting anything to be left," he said. "I'm expecting everything to be burnt down and just rummaging through the wreckage picking up whatever might be left, but it would be nice if the house survived."

Cost hits \$6.5 million

U.S. Forest Service spokesman Cody Norris said the fire is active on the northern, southeast and eastern fronts; firefighters on the west side have good containment.

There are no reported heat-related injuries, no fatalities and still no damage to structures, homes or outbuildings, he said.

Norris said weather was expected to be hot and dry Thursday, and fire personnel would be alert for a possible monsoonal front later in the evening.

Norris said the cost of fighting the fire has gone up to \$6.5 million. On Wednesday it was reported at \$4.7 million.

The fire, which officials say was started Saturday afternoon by a teenage boy lighting pine branches on fire, is now at 3,383 acres.

The Madera County District Attorney said Thursday that it doesn't expect official reports from the U.S. Forest Service until sometime next week because of the Willow Fire's continued expansion. The DA needs those reports before it can determine whether to file formal charges against the teen.

Containment remains at 30%, according to the latest report from the U.S. Forest Service, and the growth of the fire was not unexpected.

The forest service says much of the growth of the fire was on the northern flank where it pushed through a large granite face known as 7-Rock.

The forest service says it stopped a direct attack on the southern flank because of a concern for firefighter safety and the likelihood that an attack won't succeed in stopping the fire there. The southern edge of the fire is established in the previously burned area and resistance to control along the flanks increases because of dense brush and larger dead timber debris, intermingled with a concentration of tree snags.

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