

Winds helping firefighters in Cabin Fire

By David Castellon

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Cal Fire crews prevented a wildfire north of Three Rivers from growing over the weekend, while another large fire in the Sequoia National Forest expanded to about 2,800 acres.

That makes the Cabin Fire about 900 acres larger than it had been on Friday, but U.S. Forest Service officials said a weekend wind shift may allow firefighters to bring the blaze under control.

That fire is believed to have started the weekend of July 18 in a remote part of the Golden Trout Wilderness, about eight miles northeast of Camp Nelson.

Fire crews thought they had it contained to just a couple of acres early on, but flames jumped the fire line and extremely dry conditions allowed it to spread quickly.

“We had a little bit of growth yesterday,” after a small line of trees caught fire, said Richard Hadley, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman working with the U.S. Forest Service on the Cabin Fire.

But those trees had burned out by Monday, helping curtail the fire’s growth.

More importantly, Hadley said, since Saturday, the winds over the Sierra foothills shifted northeasterly.

“The wind’s pushing the fire back on itself” and back to toward the site of another lightning-caused fire in 2007 — the Lion Fire — where there is little brush and trees left to fuel the current fire, Hadley said.

He said the wind shift also is allowing some of the 394 firefighters from around the country get closer to the Cabin Fire and create fire breaks — clearing lines of brush, plants and pine needles — to contain the flames if they shift directions again.

The crews are working with hand tools because the rough, steep terrain isn’t conducive to vehicles and heavy machinery. Still, firefighters have cleared about 5 1/2 miles of fire breaks, and they’re working to clear 1 1/2 more, Hadley said.

Another benefit of the wind shift is that it’s blowing the fire away from Camp Nelson and other nearby areas with homes and cabins.

And though some cabins southwest of the fire still could be threatened, Hadley said, firefighters have cleared some fire breaks and burned some of the foliage around them ahead of the Cabin Fire, should it shift in that direction.

For now, Forest Service officials are confident they can make some progress against the fire — which was 0 percent contained as of Monday — because the winds were forecast to continue in a northeast direction at least through Friday.

Those crews have been hiking into the area or flown by helicopter, and most of the firefighters are sleeping near scene rather than at the command center set up in Springville.

Hadley said the Forest Service is in discussions with operators of pack mule businesses to transport supplies to the firefighters when smoke or weather conditions will not allow helicopters to fly there.

Meanwhile, to the north, Cal Fire reports more success containing a smaller wildland fire five miles north of Three Rivers.

Through Monday morning, the Advance Fire had burned 86 acres, the same acreage that had been reported on Friday.

Over the weekend, firefighters built fire breaks around some of the fire and had increased containment from about 40 percent on Friday to 85 percent on Monday.

In fact, the efforts were so successful that Cal Fire was sending some crews back to their stations, and Battalion Chief Greg Neeley said Monday that firefighters were able to reduce their 24-hour shifts to 12 hours.

Smoke and ash from the fires blew last week onto the Valley floor — with residents as far away as Visalia reporting that they saw the ash falling — but the change in wind direction is pushing smoke away from populated areas.

“The air quality was worse last week,” said Mike Theune, fire information officer for Sequoia and King Canyon national parks.

He said some guests told park staff last week that they could see and smell smoke, but it wasn't thick and no illnesses were reported. By Monday, the air quality in the parks was at normal levels, Theune said.

The two Tulare County wildfires are among 21 major blazes throughout California — three more than were burning on Friday — along with several hundred small fires touched off by lightning.

The Advance Fire is among the smallest; the biggest is the the Rocky Fire, which had burned more than 60,000 acres northwest of Sacramento. State officials reported at least 24 homes and 26 outbuildings destroyed by that fire. More than 9,000 firefighters were combatting the 21 fires, which are being fueled by severely drought-stricken vegetation and aggravated by low humidity and gusty winds.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Firefighter killed in Northern California blaze

A South Dakota firefighter evaluating a Northern California wildfire was killed last week by the erratic, wind-stoked blaze while he was surveying an area to decide the best way for crews to handle the flames, a U.S. Forest Service official said Saturday.

Forest Service firefighter David Ruhl, 38, was in a vehicle in the Modoc National Forest and would have been scouting for ways to suppress the fire when crews lost contact with him Thursday evening, Forest Service spokesman Ken Sandusky said.

Officials said they couldn't immediately say whether Ruhl had time to let others know by radio that he was in trouble, or whether flames overtook him too fast to call for help. His body was recovered Friday.

An investigation has begun to determine exactly what happened and whether there are any lessons to be learned from Ruhl's death, Forest Service spokeswoman Heather Noel said.

“We owe that not only to the family and to the friends and to the employees that worked with Dave, but we also owe it to the agency and the rest of the firefighters, so that whatever did happen won't be repeated if possible,” she said.

Ruhl lived in Rapid City, South Dakota, with his wife and two children and was on temporary assignment since June as an assistant fire management officer for the Big Valley Ranger District of the Modoc National Forest.