

Creek Fire live updates: Fresno's air quality better - for now; more evacuation orders lifted

By Nadia Lopez

Fresno Bee and Modesto Bee, Friday, September 18, 2020

The Creek Fire, burning in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Forest, has scorched 248,256 acres in Fresno and Madera counties and was 20% contained as of Friday morning.

Fire officials warn that strong winds, which are expected to increase within the next several days, combined with dry weather conditions, may encourage the fire to grow. Full containment of the Creek Fire, located among the communities of Shaver Lake, Big Creek, and Huntington Lake, and other fires in the Sierra National Forest, is not expected until mid-October.

About 250 U.S. Marines and sailors will be deployed into the region to help fight the ongoing fire, the second military support effort initiated this month. The marine unit from Camp Pendleton began fire training on Thursday.

The Creek Fire has forced a total of 1,024 families to evacuate from the region.

- The Sequoia Complex Fire that ignited a month ago on Aug. 19 in the Golden Trout Wilderness Area of Sequoia National Forest has burned 122,902 acres and was at 12% containment as of Friday morning.

Evacuation warnings remain in effect for the remaining areas of Three Rivers that do not fall under the mandatory evacuation order and within the community of Springville, which includes all areas between Globe Drive and Balch Park Road as well as Silver City and Mineral King.

- The Bullfrog Fire, which has been burning for a little more than a week 43 miles northeast of Clovis situated on the eastern fringe of the Dinkey Lakes Wilderness west of Courtright Reservoir, has burned 900 acres and was at 0% containment as of Friday morning. Rain overnight in the area did not have a significant effect on the fire.

Due to a strong inversion layer, the fire has grown very little since it first began on Sept. 9. An inversion layer is the air mass above the fire, caused by winds that push the smoke up and out, creating a layer that sits above the Valley.

Currently, there is a low to moderate threat to Courtright Village. Firefighters have constructed a control line along with a hose lay to protect Courtright Village if the fire moves south to protect structures. The village is located on the northwest part of Courtright Reservoir and consists of 50 residential structures.

10:25 a.m.: Evacuation orders lifted for more parts of Madera County

The Madera County Sheriff's Office on Friday announced evacuation orders for area M7 have been reduced to evacuation warnings. Still, officials warn that residents in the area need to be aware there is a potential for evacuations and need to be prepared to immediately evacuate if conditions change. Residents need to monitor the situation and be prepared to take swift and immediate action.

These areas starting Friday will be opened to residents only:

Cascadel Road between Peckinpah Acres Drive and end of the subdivision including all spur roads such as Cascadel Heights Drive, GR Trestle Court, Loma Linda Drive, Loma Linda Lane, Vista Drive West, Hillside Road, Cascadel Drive, Cascadel Lane, Cascadel Drive North, Cascadel Drive South and Waterfall Way.

10:17 a.m.: Historic Jones Store remains intact

The historic Jones Store at Beasore Meadows remains intact and unaffected by the fire's spread. The shop and restaurant in Madera County, which has a history that dates back to nearly a century, is a popular tourist attraction and local favorite.

Firefighters have drawn a contingency fire line on the opposite side of the road. The fire's edge is still about 1.5 miles away with a giant granite feature in between, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

8:55 a.m.: Air quality conditions improve, but smoke will linger in Fresno

Seven major wildfires burning in the San Joaquin Valley periphery will continue to blow large amounts of smoke into the region.

The National Weather Service predicts that strong, gusty winds over the higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada mountains will continue into the evening. Light showers are expected over the Sierra Nevada, surrounding foothills, and portions of the Valley until Friday afternoon.

The strongest winds are expected over the ridgetops and mountain crest, presenting additional challenges to containing the fire's spread.

Daytime temperatures will hover around 70 throughout the weekend, a slight decrease from average Valley temperatures.

Poor air quality in most parts of the Valley will continue Friday into the weekend, hovering around the unhealthy range for most areas, except for San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced counties that remain within the moderate and unhealthy range for sensitive groups. Kings County's air quality forecast predicts an improvement for Friday, falling below the 150 PM 2.5 mark. The air quality within the Sierra National Forest has worsened overnight, increasing into the "very unhealthy" range.

A Red Flag Warning remains in effect for areas east of the fire in Madera county.

Fresno's air quality has improved as of 8 a.m., sitting between the "good" and "moderate" ranges due to light overnight rains and morning wind patterns, according to the National Weather Service. An air quality forecast continues to show unhealthy smoke conditions will prevail later on in the day and into the weekend as an unhealthy level for all groups.

"This break may be fairly brief," said Heather Heinks, a spokesperson for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "We urge the public to remain vigilant and still pay attention to the air quality. We are definitely not out of the woods."

Officials warn against excessive and vigorous outdoor activities and advise that sensitive groups exercise and remain indoors.

Yosemite National Park, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks closed Thursday to all visitors due to poor air quality and unhealthy smoke conditions.

Yosemite, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks All Closing Due To Hazardous Air

By Jim Jakobs

GVWire, Friday, September 18, 2020

Yosemite is the latest national park to close over smoke impacts and hazardous air quality. The iconic park joins Sequoia and Kings Canyon on the list of recreation spots that have shut their gates in recent days.

The Forest Service had already announced the extension a temporary closure of all eighteen national forests in California back on September 9th due to historic fire conditions throughout the state. Decisions on re-opening will be re-evaluated daily as conditions change, the agency said.

As of 2 p.m. the air quality index at the Yosemite Village Visitor Center stood at 785 on the 'Air Now' government website. That's considered 'hazardous'.

Yosemite National Park

In a news release, Yosemite National Park says all park entrance stations and roads were closed effective at 5:00 pm on Thursday.

With air quality projected to be in the unhealthy to hazardous range over the next several days, the park anticipates the closure to be in effect at least throughout the weekend.

The park will continue to assess the smoke impacts, air quality index, and fire activity throughout the region.

Kings Canyon National Park

Sintia Kawasaki-Yee, with Kings Canyon National Park, told GV WireSM by phone that at 5 p.m. on Thursday all facilities, parking lots and the park entrance will close. “The only thing that will be open will be the Highway 180 corridor and a portion of Highway 198 for local traffic only,” Kawasaki-Yee said.

With air quality projected to be in the unhealthy to hazardous range over the next several days, the park anticipates the closure to be in effect at least through the weekend.

The park will continue to assess the smoke impacts, air quality index, and fire activity throughout the region. Kings Canyon National Park will reopen to visitors when conditions improve, and it is safe for visitors and employees.

Sequoia National Park

Sequoia National Park implemented a full park closure on September 15 in response to the nearby Castle Fire. Many park staff have been evacuated from the area and for visitor and resource protection, park managers decided to close Sequoia.

“With Mineral King, Three Rivers, and the park headquarters under an evacuation notice, staff is focused on preparing to evacuate,” Acting Superintendent Lee Taylor said in an online statement. “To ensure any pending evacuation goes as smoothly as possible we are closing Sequoia to visitors.”

Lightning storm, easterly wind: How the wildfires got so bad

By Andrew Selsky, Associated Press

The Business Journal, Thursday, September 17, 2020

(AP) — It began as a stunning light show on a mid-August weekend — lightning bolts crackling in the skies over Northern and Central California, touching down in grasslands and vineyards.

The National Weather Service warned that the dry lightning striking a parched landscape “could lead to new wildfire.”

It turned out to be a huge understatement. Thousands of bolts ignited hundreds of fires in California and at least one in Oregon, setting the stage for some of the most destructive wildfires the West Coast states have seen in modern times.

One month later, firefighters are still battling them, and at least 34 people have died in California, Oregon and Washington.

“What really was jaw dropping for people was the fact that this really changed the paradigm that people have in terms of their sense of security,” said Oregon Department of Forestry spokesman Jim Gersbach. “These burned so close to populated areas, driven by this wind — basically unstoppable.”

The massive wildfires renewed a longstanding debate over whether climate change or a lack of aggressive forest management played the bigger role this time around. Numerous studies have found that a warming Earth, which leads to higher temperatures and drier landscape, increases the likelihood of extreme events and contributes to their severity. But many experts have also argued that more needs to be done to thin forests and reduce debris so that flames have less fuel.

Before the cluster of lightning strikes, the West’s fire season had been slightly more severe than normal. In Oregon, officials had decided to not let fires grow, ordering that even small blazes be smothered quickly by aircraft, so throngs of firefighters wouldn’t be needed and potentially spread the coronavirus, Gersbach said.

But then came the weekend of Aug. 15-16.

“It’s been a pretty insane 12 hours across the Bay Area,” the National Weather Service forecasters reported, after the lightning storm during which white-hot bolts licked at the span of San Francisco’s landmark Bay Bridge.

But that was just Act I.

Act II came three weeks later, when another freak weather phenomenon occurred.

A vast high-pressure zone stretching from Alaska to the desert in the Southwest gave Denver a summer snowfall while pushing warm, dry winds toward the Pacific coast, said Greg Jones, a professor and research climatologist at Linfield University in McMinnville, Oregon. Normally, the winds that time of year go in the opposite direction.

Those gusts pushed the fires through trees and brush that had been drying out all summer, causing the blazes to explode in size and sending them rushing into towns and rural homes. Many residents barely had time to flee with just the clothes on their back.

Jones called the weather conditions “likely a once in a generation event.”

For the first time ever, five megafires — defined as covering at least 100,000 acres (405 square kilometers) — were ablaze simultaneously in Oregon last week.

Smoke covered the West Coast states, creating some of the most hazardous air quality in the world. Seattle’s iconic Space Needle was all but hidden in brown haze, topped with an American flag that drooped as if in surrender.

The smoke stretched clear across the continent and even blew over parts of Europe.

Armies of firefighters responded. Clad in orange fire-resistant suits and helmets and carrying Pulaski hand tools, they trudged across blackened earth toward the flames. National Guard troops joined the effort. Even local residents tried to save homes by gouging firelines by hand and with excavators and bulldozers.

“You gotta pull together in times like this because it’s like a war zone out here,” Kerry Kuenzi, an area resident who with several dozen others fought a monster fire in the community of Scotts Mills, Oregon, told *The Oregonian/OregonLive*.

The Beachie Creek Fire he faced covered less than a square mile (2 square kilometers) on Sept. 7. Overnight, driven by high winds and extremely dry fuels, it grew to 205 square miles (530 square kilometers), fire managers said.

New fires continued to ignite in California and Oregon. One burned near Interstate 5 in Oregon not far from the California state line, turning most of the towns of Phoenix and Talent into a blackened landscape littered with the twisted remains of mobile homes and other structures.

The flames were so intense that firefighters sometimes had to retreat, including those facing a blaze threatening Portland’s southeastern suburbs.

“You can’t really stand there with a hose when you’ve got 30-mile-an-hour winds and dry fuels,” Gersbach said.

Firefighters from across the nation and Canada have descended on the region to help fight the blazes: There are more than 17,000 in California fighting over two dozen major fires, and more than 6,000 facing about a dozen blazes in Oregon.

About 5,300 square miles (13,700 square kilometers) have burned this year in California — more than ever before, Cal Fire said. In Oregon, the figure is about 1,560 square miles (4,000 square kilometers), nearly double the 10-year average.

Residents are desperately hoping for rain to wash away the choking wildfire smoke. Predicted rains in fire-hit parts of Oregon haven’t arrived yet.

California remains dry, though calming winds and lower temperatures — caused in part by the smoke blotting out the sun — have aided firefighters. Small amounts of rain are in the forecast for far northern California and the Sierra Nevada.

More than 38,000 people are still not able to return home in California, Gov. Gavin Newsom said Wednesday. Some 4,000 people remain in shelters in Oregon, according to the American Red Cross.

Some no longer have homes to return to. About 1,600 homes were destroyed in Oregon, the state Office of Emergency Management said, and 4,200 structures burned in California.

For some of those whose homes have survived, it's too dangerous to return. With the fire season not yet over, residents are praying for a respite before the next batch of large wildfires.

Wildfire smoke will close Yosemite, Kings Canyon national parks

By Joshua Yeager

Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, September 17, 2020

Yosemite National Park will close tomorrow due to hazardous air quality and smoke caused by several massive blazes scorching California's Sierra Nevada.

Neighboring Kings Canyon National Park will also close due to smoke concerns. The parks anticipate the closures lasting through the weekend, at least.

Yosemite and Kings Canyon "will reopen to visitors when conditions improve, and it is safe for visitors and employees," parks officials said in a statement.

Before the closures, park visitors had posted pictures of apocalyptic-like skies and ash snowing down across Yosemite Valley.

Sequoia National Park shuttered Tuesday after the SQF Complex Fire made an overnight rush toward the park's boundary.

The fire exploded over the weekend to more than 100,000 acres, fueled by strong winds and millions of dead trees across the southern Sierra Nevada. The Creek Fire in Fresno and Madera counties just crossed 245,000 acres.

Parts of Three Rivers, the Gateway to the Sequoias in Tulare County, remain under a mandatory evacuation order and many rangers' homes have been affected, park officials said.

Sequoia rangers inside the national park are preparing for a mandatory evacuation and are now moving museum collections and government vehicles.

Sequoia, Sierra, Inyo and other national forests abutting the parks have been closed since Sept. 7 as a result of the fires. The closures extended to each of California's 18 national forests on Sept. 9 due to unprecedented fire activity statewide.

The closure orders were recently extended to Sept. 21 and may be pushed farther out with more than 3 million acres burning across the Golden State.

Creek Fire damage realized

The Creek Fire is currently the 16th largest wildfire in California's history, in a year of mega wildfires.

"It is one of the top 20 fires in the state," said Incident Commander Nick Truax. "Before this year, it would have been historic."

The blaze was more than 245,00 acres on Thursday and is at 18% containment, according to Cal Fire. Smoke coverage has slowed the spread of flames and caused temperatures to drop.

"This is a very large, very complex fire," Mike Wink with Cal Fire said.

There were approximately 82 Madera County structures destroyed in the blaze. Six of those structures were homes, according to Commander Bill Ward. There are still more damage assessments to be made.

Madera County sheriff's deputies notified the residents whose homes were lost in the fire.

The Fresno County side of the fire sustained significantly more damage, according to Truax.

"We are working with (Fresno County) to come up with away to get that information out," Truax said. "Hopefully in the next couple of days, we'll have someone from (Fresno County Office of Emergency Services) describe that process."

Of the 4,900 structures under assessment, 30% have been validated using Fresno and Madera counties assessor records.

Related: 'It's just too dangerous': Firefighters make slow progress assessing Creek Fire damage

So far, damage inspection teams have counted 272 destroyed structures and 32 damaged structures.

"These are the areas we can safely get to," Truax said. "There are a lot of areas that trees have fallen across the roads. It's going to take some time to open those roads up."

Before residents are allowed back to their homes, crews and utility companies have to deem the areas safe.

"The first step is to render Highway 168, in the south, safe," Truax said. "The first thing that needs to happen is we need to get rid of the hazard trees, put up guardrails to make it safe for travel. That will also make it safe for police and fire to get in and out."

CalTrans has been allowed to start work on roads, as well as power companies.

No additional evacuation orders or warnings were issued for Fresno or Madera counties.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish mentions the closure of several national parks due to hazardous air quality.](#)

Cierran Parque Yosemite debido a los niveles peligrosos que registra la calidad del aire en la zona

Desde que estalló el incendio Creek hace dos semanas atrás, la calidad del aire en las inmediaciones del Parque Nacional se ha mantenido en niveles insalubres. Pero durante las últimas jornadas, la contaminación en el aire alcanzó categoría peligrosa.

Univision, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020

FRESNO, California.- Autoridades del Parque Nacional Yosemite anunciaron este mediodía que el recinto cierra sus puertas a partir de las 5pm de este jueves 17 de septiembre, debido a las condiciones peligrosas en la calidad del aire del sector.

El Parque Nacional cierra el acceso vehicular y la puerta a todos los visitantes debido al impacto del humo que cubre el cielo de Yosemite.

"Todas las estaciones de entrada al parque y las carreteras cerrarán a partir de las 5:00 pm de esta noche" dice el comunicado enviado por las autoridades del parque, y añade que debido a que el pronóstico en la calidad del aire se mantendrá en rangos insalubres, el cierre del Parque se extenderá al menos durante el fin de semana.

El parque continuará evaluando los impactos del humo, el índice de calidad del aire y la actividad de los incendios en toda la región, por lo que una vez cuando las condiciones mejoren, se reabrirá el recinto.

"El Parque Nacional Yosemite reabrirá a los visitantes cuando las condiciones mejoren, y sea seguro para los visitantes y empleados" indica la declaración oficial.

El humo derivado de los 26 incendios activos en California impactan significativamente en la calidad del aire, pero principalmente el incendio Creek, cuyas llamas estallaron hace dos semanas y su contención avanza lentamente.

Calidad del aire 'sin precedentes' en California

De acuerdo a los niveles de AQI (índice de calidad del aire) se establecen los niveles con los cuales las autoridades clasifican a las ciudades más contaminadas. En el ranking elaborado por la Organización Mundial de la Salud sobre las ciudades más contaminadas figuran Ghaziabad, en India y Hotan, en China, con un nivel promedio anual de 110 AQI.

Peligroso: 300-500 AQI

Muy insalubre: 201-300 AQI

Insalubre: 151-200 AQI

Insalubre para grupos sensibles: 101-150 AQI

Moderado: 51-100 AQI

Bueno: 0-50 AQI

Este listado de la OMS ubica a ciudades como Los Ángeles, Fresno o Bakersfield con un nivel de AQI inferior a 20, por lo que son consideradas ciudades con aire bueno. Sin embargo, un estudio de la Asociación Americana del Pulmón, publicado en abril pasado determinó que todos los condados del Valle de San Joaquín obtienen nota F en lo que refiere a calidad del aire.

Dicho reporte reveló que las áreas urbanas más contaminadas del país durante el período 2016-2018 fueron Bakersfield, seguida de Fresno-Madera-Hanford, y Visalia; mientras que la ciudad con mayor concentración de ozono en su aire fue Los Ángeles, seguida por Visalia y Bakersfield.

Los incendios que arrasan con California desde agosto pasado mantienen los niveles de calidad del aire por sobre los 150 AQI, considerado 'insalubre'.

Los niveles AQI, en ciudades de China, India y Pakistán sobrepasan los 100 AQI diariamente. Durante el último mes, la Bahía de San Francisco y el Valle Central de California cumplen un mes con niveles de contaminación similares a los vividos en Asia.

La contaminación atmosférica es uno de los problemas del mundo globalizado y consecuencia del cambio climático, aunque la ciencia y la política no se ponen de acuerdo. Un estudio de la OMS, que evaluó los efectos de la contaminación en las personas reveló que 4 millones de personas mueren por causas atribuibles a la mala calidad del aire.