

Cal Fire: Creek Fire now the largest single wildfire in California history

By Joe Jacquez

Visalia Times-Delta, Wednesday, September 23, 2020

The Creek Fire is now the largest single, non-complex wildfire in California history, according to an update from Cal Fire.

The fire has burned 286,519 acres as of Monday night and is 32 percent contained, according to Cal Fire.

The Creek Fire, which began Sept. 4, is located in Big Creek, Huntington Lake, Shaver Lake, Mammoth Pool and San Joaquin River Canyon.

Creek Fire damage realized

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 as evacuation orders are lifted and converted to warnings.

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," Incident Commander Nick Truax said.

California wildfires: Firefighters battle more than 25 major blazes, Bobcat Fire grows

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 more than 300 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.

News: Creek Fire ignites fire management debate on 102 million trees killed by beetles, drought

What are the biggest fires in California's history?

The top five **non-complex wildfires** in California's recorded history according to Cal Fire are:

1. Creek Fire (286,519 acres)
2. Thomas Fire (281,893 acres)
3. Cedar Fire (273,246 acres)
4. Rush Fire (271,911 acres in California, 43,666 acres in Nevada)
5. Rim Fire (257,314 acres)

Creek Fire updates: Blaze is largest single wildfire in state history; Yosemite still closed

By Joshua Tehee

Fresno Bee, Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2020

The Creek Fire ranks as the sixth largest in California history.

But it's also the state's single largest fire incident.

"The five other fires that are larger were all complex fires, which means there are multiple fires involved," said Cal Fire incident commander Nick Truax. "I just don't want that to be lost. Sometimes the map may look a little bit simple if you haven't been out there."

Fire crews continue to make progress to control the fire, which covered 289,695 acres in Fresno and Madera counties and is burning 14 miles from Mammoth Lakes on Wednesday.

The fire grew by just under 6,000 acres on Tuesday, while containment grew to 32% as some residents and homeowners were allowed back in for the first time. Another group will be allowed in Wednesday.

With the damage survey nearly done, 855 structures have been listed as destroyed by the fire.

- The nearby SQF Complex Fire, which includes the Castle and Shotgun fires, continues to burn in and near the Sequoia National Forest. It grew by a little more than 4,000 acres Tuesday. As of Wednesday morning, it has burned 144,708 acres and remains at 33% contained.▪ The Bullfrog Fire east of Clovis remains at 890 acres with 20% containment.

8:40 a.m. Kings Canyon National Park open; Yosemite and Sequoia closed

Kings Canyon National Park reopened on Wednesday after being closed due to air quality last week. This includes the park entrance station on Highway 180 into Kings Canyon, Kings Canyon Visitor Center, trails, facilities and parking areas.

The Sunset Campground reopens by reservation only on Thursday and the Grant Grove area lodging and market reopens Friday. The Hume Lake Ranger District, which is managed by the U.S. Forest Service, reopens Friday.

Yosemite National Park remained closed to recreation on Wednesday, though through traffic is being allowed on some roads.

Sequoia National Park and the Sequoia and Sierra national forests remain closed.

8 a.m.: Air quality was 'good' overnight and into the morning

The air quality expected to be unhealthy for sensitive groups through most parts of the central San Joaquin Valley on Wednesday, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The air should remain very unhealthy in the Sequoia National Park and Forest areas, which remain closed due to smoke conditions.

Fresno and Kern counties are predicted to reach levels that are unhealthy for all group, though the air quality in Fresno overnight and into Wednesday morning fell into the range of "good." As of 7 a.m. the PM2.5 particulate levels in Fresno were at level 1, where outdoor activity OK for everyone.

California to ban sale of new gas-only cars in 2035 under Newsom order

By Alexei Koseff and Dustin Gardiner

San Francisco Chronicle, Wednesday, September 23, 2020

SACRAMENTO — California will ban the sale of new gasoline-only cars starting in 2035, the most aggressive action Gov. Gavin Newsom has yet taken to combat the causes of climate change.

Newsom plans to sign an executive order Wednesday requiring that all new passenger vehicles sold in California by 2035 be zero-emission — a category that includes battery-powered electric cars, those that run on hydrogen fuel cells, and plug-in hybrids, which still use some gasoline or diesel in addition to electricity.

The transportation sector is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in California, accounting for more than 40% of its planet-warming gases in 2017, the most recent year for which data are available. The state estimates that mandating 100% of new passenger cars and trucks be zero-emission would reduce total greenhouse gas emissions by more than a third.

“This is the most impactful step our state can take to fight climate change,” Newsom said in a statement. “For too many decades, we have allowed cars to pollute the air that our children and families breathe. You deserve to have a car that doesn’t give your kids asthma. Our cars shouldn’t make wildfires worse — and create more days filled with smoky air. Cars shouldn’t melt glaciers or raise sea levels threatening our cherished beaches and coastlines.”

The governor’s order would not prohibit Californians from owning gas-powered vehicles or selling them on the used-car market. It follows similar pledges by countries including the United Kingdom and France to transition entirely to sales of new zero-emissions vehicles over the coming decades.

For weeks, as large swaths of California have burned in a record wildfire season, Newsom has sounded the alarm on the “climate damn emergency” that is contributing to more severe fires and said the state must move more swiftly to combat it.

But he has faced criticism from environmentalists for not backing up his rhetoric. Activists have been particularly incensed that his administration has clamped down on oil and gas drilling, issuing more new permits in the first half of 2020 than over the same six months of 2019.

Newsom said the ban on new gas-only vehicles would accelerate California’s transition away from fossil fuels, a major contributing factor to climate change. He also said he would ask the Legislature to pass a law ending the issuance of new permits for hydraulic fracturing, the controversial natural gas extraction method known also known as fracking, by 2024.

Earlier this summer, California adopted a first-in-the-nation requirement that would require automakers to begin selling zero-emission big rigs starting in 2024 and would force most new trucks to go emissions-free by 2035.

Newsom also signed a deal with four car companies last year to boost the fuel efficiency of their new models above federal targets, putting California on a collision course with the Trump administration.

Poor air quality to return to Kern County, air district says

The Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Sept. 22, 2020

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has announced air quality will worsen in a number of regions, including Kern County, as the week progresses.

Ongoing wildfires are the cause of the worsening air quality, which has been relatively good over the last few days. As the haze from the wildfires returns, the district is urging residents to stay indoors to reduce their exposure to particulate matter.

Impacted areas include San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties along with the valley portion of Kern County.

The district said in a news release that particulate matter pollution can cause asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis and increase the risk of a heart attack and stroke. Those with heart and lung diseases should follow the advice of their doctor.

People with respiratory illnesses, including COVID-19, are especially susceptible to health problems due to the poor air quality, the district said in the release.

Residents can track the air quality at myRAAN.com. The public can also check www.valleyair.org/wildfires for information about the wildfires affecting the valley.

Hazy, smoky skies expected to return, air officials say

By Vongni Yang

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, September 22, 2020

The air quality in the Central San Joaquin Valley has been improving, but that won’t last according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District.

After three solid days of moderate air quality conditions in the Valley, including parts of Tulare County, the district reissued another health caution Tuesday, alerting residents of the increasing health impacts from

exposure to unhealthy air quality and particulate matter emissions. The health caution will remain in place until wildfires are extinguished.

Smoke from wildfires continues to deteriorate the Central Valley's air quality and residents should brace for unhealthy air quality later this week, said Heather Heinks, the district communications and outreach manager.

Officials say the SQF Complex Fire in Tulare County, Creek Fire in Fresno and Madera counties, and multiple large wildfires in Northern California will cause unhealthy air quality in the Central Valley.

"We're coming off much nicer days than we've seen in weeks," Heinks said. "That was thanks to a wind shift and a little bit of weakening pressure up in the atmosphere, allowing smoke to kind of lift a little higher and get blown across towards Nevada."

But that wind flow is expected to change, Heinks added.

"By week's end, we expect most of the haze to return with the significant cover," she said.

The bad air can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, the district reported.

Valley counties impacted by wildfire smoke include San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties, and parts of Kern County.

Valley residents are encouraged to move indoors if they are experiencing unhealthy air quality and should proceed with caution while participating in activities outdoors. Residents should also abide by the Real-time Outdoor Activity Risk (ROAR) guidelines, which rates the air quality from level one to level five.

Outdoor activity is OK for all with no restrictions at level one with level five asking everyone to avoid outdoor activities.

Residents can track air quality online or by downloading the free "Valley Air" application on their mobile device. Wildfire information is also available at the district's [website](#).

SQF Complex Fire: Containment nearly doubles to 33%; 1.5 million gallons of retardant dropped

By Joshua Yeager

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, September 22, 2020

Containment of the SQF Complex Fire has nearly doubled overnight to 33%, an increase of 15% over Monday. The big step in the fight against the 140,000-acre wildfire comes as firefighters say they are able to take a more offensive approach for the first time in more than a week.

Beginning Monday, conditions allowed crews to move away from defending structures and begin to build new fire lines around the fire's perimeter in the Sequoia National Forest. Work will continue Tuesday in Ponderosa to fortify those lines and make sure that flames and embers won't reach the mountain community.

Firefighters will also establish an anchor near Pierpoint for more lines while crews mop up hot spots around Camp Nelson. Lines bordering the Tule River Indian Reservation will be widened to provide additional protection for tribal lands and resources.

In the journey to full containment, air crews have played an "integral part of daily firefighting operations on the Sequoia Complex," said Incident Commander Mike Goicoechea. His Northern Rockies Team has logged 1,670 hours of flight time since Sept. 3, dropping 1.4 million gallons of water and 1.5 million gallons of retardant on the fire. Eighty-eight thousand pounds of cargo has also been hauled up the steep mountain to support fire operations.

On Wednesday, the Northern Rockies Team will transition management of the fire's east zone to California Team 2. The incoming commander, Mike Minton, is familiar with the topography and conditions of the forest and Goicoechea said the transition will be a smooth one.

"I am confident that this transfer will in no way have a negative effect on the ground firefighting efforts. I have full confidence that the new team will continue to protect communities and add additional containment lines to the fire," Goicoechea said.

The fire's west zone remains under the management of Cal Fire. The fire's western edge continues to actively burn and is a top priority for the state fire service, officials said. Defensive burns have successfully shielded the community of South Fork, above Three Rivers.

The fire is now one mile away from the Sequoia National Park boundary and the Kings Canyon Ranger Station. Crews are stationed in the area and ready to defend the structure if necessary.

The SQF Complex has destroyed 187 structures, including residences and outbuildings. Crews are continuing to survey damages and firefighters remain in communities that the fire has burned through to douse hot spots and prevent the fire from reestablishing itself.

"We do have (assessment) teams out there working extremely hard to get those numbers back to you guys. Thank you all for bearing with us," said Toni Davis, a Cal Fire spokesperson.

The public can view property damage caused by the SQF Complex in an online map hosted by Tulare County. The map is updated daily. People affected by the fire can also call 802-9790 for additional resources.

Conditions are expected to remain unfavorable for firefighters in the coming days, despite a slight drop in temperatures and marginally higher levels of relative humidity. It has been 108 days since the SQF Complex experienced a tenth of an inch of rainfall, firefighters said. The blaze is believed to have started during a historic mid-August lightning storm and was discovered by a spotter plane on Aug. 19.

Statewide, 18,700 firefighters continue to battle 27 large wildfires in California. Since the beginning of the year, there have been about 8,000 wildfires that have burned more than 3.6 million acres in California.

This week, the Sequoia National Forest Brekenridge Hotshots helped defend the Mount Wilson Observatory from the Bobcat Fire in the mountains above Pasadena in Southern California.

5 of the 6 largest California wildfires in history started in the past 6 weeks

By Michael McGough

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, Sept. 22, 2020

The staggering statistics keep piling up for California's wildfire season: August and September account for five of the six biggest fires in nearly 90 years of recorded history for the state.

The destructive Creek Fire that continues to burn in Fresno County grew about 3,000 acres between Monday and Tuesday for a new total of 283,724 acres, leapfrogging the 2017 Thomas Fire for the No. 6 spot, according to Cal Fire records. It is 30% contained.

Ahead of the Creek Fire, which started Sept. 4, are four massive wildfire complexes that sparked during a freak mid-August thunderstorm. The storm pummeled Northern California and the Bay Area with thousands of lightning strikes, igniting dozens of large fires and hundreds of smaller ones. Then, gusty winds within the next few weeks caused some of the larger incidents to swell or erupt in size.

The 2018 Mendocino Complex had previously been the state's largest fire on record, reaching 459,123 acres. Until 2020, it was the only wildfire to eclipse 300,000 acres, dating back to the start of reliable record keeping in 1932.

The Mendocino Complex is now the second-biggest in state history, behind the 847,000-acre August Complex burning with just 38% containment near Mendocino National Forest as of Tuesday morning, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Two of the 2020 behemoths, the SCU Lightning Complex (No. 3 at 396,624 acres) and the LNU Lightning Complex (No. 4, 363,220 acres) in the South and North Bay areas, respectively, are almost fully contained. Early last week, Cal Fire reported each at 98% containment and said fire activity had ceased and stopped issuing daily incident reports.

Rounding out the all-time list at No. 5 is the North Complex burning in parts of Butte, Plumas and Yuba counties, which reached 299,723 acres as of Tuesday morning updates from Cal Fire and the Forest Service. At least 15 people have died in the North Complex, which ties it for the fifth-deadliest wildfire in California history.

Those five fires that have started in the past six weeks have burned nearly 2.4 million combined acres — an area of about 3,750 square miles, which is more than triple the size of Rhode Island.

They're among more than 7,800 major and minor wildfire incidents that have sparked this year, combining for nearly 3.4 million acres — the most ever in a calendar year — as of mid-September, according to the Cal Fire website. About 1.4 million of those acres have burned in jurisdiction handled by Cal Fire, with the remaining 2 million in U.S. Forest Service territory.

Recent major wildfires also include four of the state's Top 20 in history in terms of destruction. The North Complex has destroyed more than 2,050 buildings, which ranks it No. 5. The LNU Complex and the CZU Lightning Complex, which sparked last month in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties, are virtually tied at No. 10, each destroying about 1,490 structures. And the Creek Fire, burning for less than three weeks, has destroyed at least 855.

Will autumn be even worse?

In a column published by the San Luis Obispo Tribune on Tuesday, the first official day of fall, PG&E Diablo Canyon meteorologist John Lindsey predicted that the change of season could bring even worse, more destructive wildfires to California than the summer did.

He explained his reasoning:

"In the fall, high pressure often builds over the Great Basin, the space between the Sierra Nevada range to the west and the Rocky Mountains to the east," Lindsey wrote. "This condition can produce north to northeasterly katabatic, or, downslope winds.

"These gales can bring dry and heated air that blows across bone-dry vegetation and trees that have not seen rainfall in months, a typical fall California condition before the rainy season's first significant showers arrives."

Climate change and California wildfires

Wildfires have always been part of life in California. The past four years have brought some of the most destructive and deadliest wildfires in the state's modern history.

Nearly 180 people have lost their lives since 2017. More than 41,000 structures have been destroyed and nearly 7 million acres have burned — that's roughly the size of Massachusetts.

So far this year, 26 people have died, according to Cal Fire.

Meanwhile, this year's August was the hottest on record in California. A rare series of lightning storms sparked a series of fires, including the August Complex that has burned roughly 840,000 acres, making it the largest wildfire in California's recorded history.

Our climate is becoming more severe.

The 2017 wildfire season occurred during the second hottest year on record in California and included a devastating string of fires in October that killed 44 people and destroyed nearly 9,000 buildings in Napa, Lake, Sonoma, Mendocino, Butte and Solano counties.

The following year was the most destructive and deadliest for wildfires in the state's history. It included the Camp Fire, which destroyed the town of Paradise and killed 85 people, and the enormous Mendocino Complex.