

Caldor fire blows past 200,000 acres as it moves toward Nevada; crews grow fatigued

Anita Chabria, Ruben Vives and Hayley Smith Los Angeles Times
The Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Sep 1, 2021

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. — Wildfire crews faced yet another grueling day Wednesday as the massive Caldor fire blew past 200,000 acres and continued its steady march east.

The head of the fire is now approaching the Nevada state line, spurring concerns that it could become a multi-state blaze. Firefighters made an all-out effort Tuesday to defend the Lake Tahoe Basin and were able to protect many of the homes in Christmas Valley and Meyers, while also herding the flames into areas south of the popular resort city of South Lake Tahoe.

“We’re fortunate the fire did not make as strong a push into Tahoe as it did the previous day,” Tim Ernst, operations section chief with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, said during a Wednesday morning briefing.

But the threat is not yet gone: Another day of strong winds and bone-dry conditions lies ahead, and firefighters are bracing for a continuous battle against airborne embers and fast-moving flare-ups. Red flag warnings remain in place over much of the fire area until 11 p.m. Wednesday, indicating the potential for wind gusts as strong as 30 mph.

“The wind regime you saw yesterday will continue today,” incident meteorologist Jim Dudley said. “Where it was gusty on the ridges, and you saw the swirling erratic wind conditions, you’re going to see that again today.”

Strong winds are a major concern for firefighters, as they can send embers aloft and ignite spot fires as far as a mile away, officials said.

Fire behavior analyst Steven Volmer said given the hot, dry conditions in the area, the probability of an errant ember sparking a new fire was “extremely high” — above 90%. And when fires do start, they can spread at speeds of 200 feet per minute between the crowns of trees, and about 100 feet per minute on the ground, he said.

Beyond the wind, firefighters are also dealing with another challenge, officials said: fatigue. The fire has been burning for 18 days. As of Wednesday morning, it had seared through 204,390 acres and was 20% contained.

“Whether you have been here for the duration of this incident, you came from another fire or you’ve been covering at home, fatigue can and will set in,” one safety officer told firefighters, noting that “we all know we still have a long grind ahead of us.”

The eastern flank of the fire is among the top concerns, officials said, and there was also talk that the fire could head south toward Markleeville in the coming days.

Containment lines made with bulldozers near Heavenly appear to be keeping the fire at bay, although flames remain active on the ridge above Kirkwood and in Wrights Lake north of Highway 50.

The original part of the fire — near Grizzly Flats to the west — is still causing problems, although officials hope to lift some of the evacuation orders in that area within the next 48 hours.

Calling it the state’s “No. 1 priority,” Gov. Gavin Newsom said significant resources were being dedicated to the firefight, including fire retardant being dropped by aircraft, helicopters making water drops, and the National Guard deployed to battle the blaze.

Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak this week declared a state of emergency “in the anticipation of the fire crossing from California into the state of Nevada in the coming days,” his office said.

More than 4,200 personnel have been assigned to fight the fire, officials said.

Evacuation orders have been issued across a wide swath of the area, including South Lake Tahoe and into Douglas County. Nearly 35,000 structures are threatened by the fire.

By late Tuesday afternoon, half a dozen sheriff's deputies in safety vests began a door-to-door notification in the mountain areas just past the state line, including Kingsbury at the top of Daggett Summit, as most residents packed their cars and headed out.

Ryan Guest was filling his red Toyota 4Runner with clothes in garbage bags and bins. He returned from Cabo San Lucas in Mexico only a few weeks ago but is now heading back on the road to San Diego, where he has family.

"It's not worth it," he said of the risk of staying.

Smoke from the fire is also contributing to worsening air quality across the region, with the El Dorado County Air Quality Management District warning residents that the air quality forecast is "very unhealthy" through at least Friday.

Official reports progress in defending Lake Tahoe from fire

By Sam Metz and Janie Har Associated Press/Report For America
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Sep 1, 2021

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — Firefighters reported progress Wednesday in the battle to save communities on the south end of Lake Tahoe from an approaching forest fire after the stiff winds and searing temperatures they had feared failed to materialize in the California-Nevada alpine region.

"We lucked out a little bit yesterday with some of the winds that didn't come up quite as hard as we expected them to," Tim Ernst, an operations section chief, told firefighters in a morning briefing.

An inversion layer, a cap of warm air over cooler air, then developed in the early morning hours "that put a real damper on things, slowed a lot of growth," Ernst said. "So a lot of opportunity to make a lot of progress last night."

The Caldor Fire has been burning toward Lake Tahoe from the southwest along California Highway 50, climbing over a high-elevation Sierra Nevada summit and descending into the Tahoe Basin.

"We were fortunate the fire did not make as strong a push into Tahoe as it did the previous day," Ernst said.

At the northeast tip of the fire, south of the city of South Lake Tahoe, "we've got some great dozer line that protects structures here, so this whole community is looking really good right now," he said.

Despite the positive developments, firefighters were warned that critical weather conditions remained and they would likely face gusty, swirling winds all day.

Thick smoke from the [Caldor Fire](#) has enveloped the city of South Lake Tahoe, which is all but deserted during a summer week usually bustling with tourists.

On Monday, roughly 22,000 residents jammed the city's main artery for hours after they were ordered to leave as the fire advanced.

South Lake Tahoe city officials said only a handful of [residents defied Monday's evacuation order](#). But nearly everyone worried Tuesday about what the fire would do next.

Tom O'Connell and his wife, Linda, awaited the fate of their home while anchored on their sailboat in Ventura Harbor. The two-bedroom they've owned for 40 years survived the Angora Fire that destroyed about 250 houses in 2007. They didn't know if they'd be lucky again.

"You worry about the things you can have some control over," O'Connell said. "We've no control over this."

Pushed by strong winds, the Caldor Fire has crossed two major highways and swept down slopes into the Tahoe Basin, where firefighters working in steep terrain were protecting remote cabins.

Cal Fire Division Chief Erich Schwab said some homes burned, but it was too early to know how many.

Thick smoke prevented air firefighting operations periodically last week. But since then, nearly two dozen helicopters and three air tankers dumped thousands of gallons of water and retardant on the fire, fire spokesman Dominic Polito said.

As flames moved toward the Heavenly ski resort on the California-Nevada border, officials turned on the mountain's snow-making machines. Cal Fire Battalion Chief Jed Gaines told San Francisco television station KPIX that spraying the slopes with water was "increasing the humidity level, it's getting everything wet" so that if the fire starts climbing "it's able to slow it down."

The Lake Tahoe area is usually a year-round recreational paradise offering beaches, water sports, hiking, ski resorts and golfing. South Lake Tahoe bustles with outdoor activities while just across the state border in Stateline, Nevada tourists can gamble at major casinos.

But on Tuesday, only a few dozen tourists remained on the casino floor of the Montbleu Resort, Casino and Spa. The state board that controls gaming said that casino regulators were monitoring operations at the four largest gambling properties in the city.

Hotels are housing evacuees, fire crews and other emergency personnel. In all, Harrah's, Harveys Lake Tahoe Casino, the Hard Rock and Montbleu Resort have more than 2,200 hotel rooms.

Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak urged residents to be prepared, saying there was no timeline for when evacuations might be ordered. At a news conference in Carson City, he noted that ash was falling on him even though the fire was about 20 miles (32 kilometers) away.

"I'm standing here and I'm getting all ash particulates on my jacket, even," the governor said. "This is serious, folks."

Hours later, residents in parts of Douglas County under an evacuation warning were ordered to leave, although casinos were excluded.

At the Douglas County Community & Senior Center in Gardnerville, people had their temperature checked before entering a gymnasium of cots set up by the Red Cross. Outside, evacuees who had stayed in tents sorted through ramen noodles and plastic bags of clothes and keepsakes.

South Lake Tahoe resident Lorie Major was at the grocery store when she got the alert on her phone.

"I had to tell myself: 'OK, Lorie: Get it together. It's time to go,'" she said.

She put on headphones, turned on the Grateful Dead's "Fire on the Mountain" and walked home to an empty apartment complex already vacated by neighbors. She and her mini Australian shepherd, Koda, took a 20-mile (32-kilometer) taxi ride from her South Lake Tahoe apartment to a hotel in Minden, Nevada.

A firefighter injured while battling the Caldor Fire last weekend was expected to be hospitalized for a month after undergoing skin grafting surgery. Richard Gerety III of Patterson, California suffered third-degree burns over 20% of his body, the Modesto Bee reported. Despite the very active fire year, there have not been many injuries or deaths among firefighters or residents.

More than 15,000 firefighters were battling dozens of California blazes, with help from out of state crews. Climate change has made the West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive, scientists say.

The threat of fire is so widespread that the U.S. Forest Service announced Monday that all national forests in California would be closed until Sept. 17.

Crews are battling the Dixie, the second-largest wildfire in state history at 1,281 square miles (3,317 square kilometers). The weeks-old fire was burning about 65 miles (105 kilometers) north of the Lake Tahoe-area blaze and prompting new evacuation orders and warnings this week.

The Caldor Fire has scorched nearly 312 square miles (808 square kilometers) since breaking out Aug. 14. It was 18% contained.

More than 600 structures have been destroyed, and at least 33,000 more were threatened.

At the evacuation center in Gardnerville, Joe Gillespie said he, his girlfriend and her son left their home in Meyers south of South Lake Tahoe on Sunday, bringing clothes, picture frames and collectibles like Hot Wheels toys from the 1960s that Gillespie's mother gave him.

Gillespie, a mechanic at Sierra-at-Tahoe Resort, said that unlike the northern shore of Lake Tahoe, which is dotted with mansions and second homes, the area currently under threat houses blue-collar workers who make their living at the casinos and ski resorts that make the area so popular.

The Sierra-at-Tahoe Resort is beloved for its unpretentious and comparatively affordable winter prices. It turns 75 this year, he said.

"It sounds like we won't be opening because of the fire," he said.

Explainer: Around Tahoe, special places await a fire's fate

By Tom Verdin Associated Press

The Business Journal, Tuesday, August 31, 2021

(AP) — As the winds returned this week, the Caldor Fire roared over the Sierra crest and bore down on the southern end of Lake Tahoe. Perhaps more than with other wildfires in the Western U.S., this one resonates the world over. Tahoe is an international destination, a glorious wedding backdrop, a sparkling jewel in John Muir's Range of Light.

The postcard photos of Emerald Bay are as iconic as those of another famous California landmark, the Golden Gate Bridge.

But Tahoe, and the granite ridges and forests and rivers around it, is more than that. To millions of Northern Californians, the region is as familiar as the backyard — less than two hours from the Sacramento metro area and its 2.3 million people and another hour (depending on traffic) from the San Francisco Bay Area.

In a typical summer, the wide path of destruction already cut by the Caldor Fire through the Eldorado National Forest would be filled with day hikers, backpackers, campers, kayakers and paddle boarders. Vacation cabins along the South Fork of the American River, many of which are now reduced to ash, would be filled with families from Sacramento, the Bay Area and beyond. Similar cabins that fill the woods on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe await their fate amid the red flag warnings of the coming days.

Because the region means so much to so many, the Caldor Fire has captured the attention of Californians and others with a special connection to the region like no other in recent memory.

WHERE HAS THE FIRE ALREADY BURNED?

The immediate danger is to South Lake Tahoe, the city of 22,000 that straddles the border between California and Nevada and is in the Caldor Fire's path.

Before its run over the Sierra at Echo Summit, the fire had already destroyed hundreds of homes where it originated in the Sierra foothills and churned through tens of thousands of thickly forested acres along the Highway 50 corridor, one of the two main routes between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe.

The news here is not all bad. Over the weekend, before the Caldor Fire began its run toward Tahoe, fire crews prevented major damage to Sierra-at-Tahoe Ski Resort. Unpretentious and comparatively affordable, it's beloved for its "certified unserious" vibe and lower-cost season passes that have made it popular for parents who want to teach their kids to ski or snowboard without having to pay college tuition-like prices.

Fire crews also saved Camp Sacramento, a 100-year-old family camp run by the city on Forest Service land just down the highway from the ski resort. Families have come every summer for two, three, even four generations to the old school camp (a cabin with an electrical outlet is considered a luxury). It's where kids line up to ring the camp bell before meal time and then gather in age groups as Minnows, Chipmunks or Marmots for tie dye, archery, the Puppy Love hike.

Farther up Highway 50, near the top of Echo Summit, is the Echo Chalet, a cluster of summer cabins dating to the 1940s that was in the path of the flames before being evacuated. It's perhaps best known for

providing a water taxi across Twin Lake to a trailhead into the Desolation Wilderness, a popular backcountry of granite and lakes that was shaped by glaciers and now is being tested by fire.

WHAT IS SOUTH LAKE TAHOE?

South shore is a split screen. On one, the high-rise casinos of the Nevada side and their gambling crowds. On New Year's Eve, at least pre-pandemic, they gave one heck of a street party. Heavenly Resort straddles both states and is renowned for its powder skiing, iconic lake views and — perhaps because of proximity — party atmosphere.

But South Lake Tahoe has another side. Most of the year-round residents would not consider themselves glitzy or glamorous. They are casinos workers, wait staff, bar tenders, ski instructors, construction workers, Forest Service or state park employees.

The median household income of roughly \$49,000 is just 65% of the statewide median. Rents and home prices have soared during the pandemic, squeezing the working class and middle-income residents who make up the bulk of the town's population. Besides the tourists, these are the evacuees who have packed up and fled as the Caldor Fire threatens.

WHAT REMAINS IN THE FIRE'S PATH?

Like the monstrous Dixie Fire that ignited before it, the Caldor Fire continues to confound and outpace a massive firefighting force. It already has taken an unusual path by burning up to and over the Sierra crest. As it burns ever closer to South Lake Tahoe, it threatens to consume landmarks, campgrounds, summer cabins and places cherished by generations of visitors.

Fallen Leaf Lake, another cerulean postcard, is home to a Forest Service campground (upgraded with yurts), cabins and a summer conference center for Stanford University. Camp Richardson is a lakeshore stretch of cabins and tents (and an ice cream parlor that may be the most popular in Tahoe) that traces its earliest days as a resort to the turn of the last century and is a summer tradition for thousands. At Emerald Bay, if the fire gets that far, is Vikingsholm, a replica of a Scandinavian castle that has survived for nearly a century and now is part of a state park. As if in defiance of California's ever-worsening wildfire season, it has a traditional sod roof.

If the Caldor Fire were to reach Emerald Bay, it would first have to tear through one of the most popular hiking trails in all of Tahoe — the Eagle Falls Trail. In non-drought years, snowmelt tumbles down from the Sierra crest and eventually cascades over boulders just above Emerald Bay, providing a strikingly sublime photo for tourists from around the world each summer.

This summer, that postcard picture is one of smoke and fire and fear. The Range of Light has burst into a range of flame, and so far there is no stopping it.

French Fire 40% contained as firefight turns a 'corner'

The Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Aug. 31, 2021

The French Fire has grown to 25,643 acres and was 40 percent contained as of Tuesday afternoon, according to the California Interagency Management Team.

Containment has jumped almost 14 percent since Monday, the largest one-day containment increase since the wildfire began Aug. 18.

"While the fire has been destructive, our firefighters have worked tirelessly and preserved many communities in the Kern River Valley and I believe we have turned a corner and are working toward full containment," Kern County Fire Department Chief Aaron Duncan said.

Containment lines continue to hold and there has been minimal expansion of the fire on the northern portion of the blaze. Most growth occurred on the northwest side, but that activity is not a threat to control the fire, according to the management team. Flames have not crossed containment lines created to prevent the fire from spreading in that direction, said James Wettstaed, a public information officer for the management team.

The area around Wofford Heights was expected to have been fully secured by the end of Tuesday, said Chris St. Pierre, the operations section chief with the management team. He added that Evans Flat experienced some spot fires sparked by flames within the Poso Creek area.

Red Cross spokeswoman Taylor Poisall said five individuals were staying at the evacuation shelter at Woodrow Wallace Elementary School at about 3 p.m. Tuesday.

The center offers services from the Kern County Animal Services, Central California Animal Disaster Team, county Behavioral Health, Victims Chaplain Association and more, Poisall said.

About 754 people have been evacuated because of the French Fire, according to the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services.

Keyesville, Shirley Meadows, Alta Sierra, Slick Rock, Waggy Flat and Black Gulch are under evacuation orders. Regions under evacuation warnings include Wofford Heights, Pala Ranches, Isabella Highlands, Hungry Gulch and Dutch Flat.

High winds threaten to whip up flames approaching Lake Tahoe

By Sam Metz and Janie Har Associated Press/Report For America
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Aug. 31, 2021

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — A day after an explosive wildfire emptied a resort city at the southern tip of Lake Tahoe, a huge firefighting force braced for strong winds Tuesday as some residents in neighboring Nevada were ordered to evacuate.

The city of South Lake Tahoe, usually bustling with summer tourists, was eerily empty and the air thick and hazy with smoke from the Caldor Fire, one of two major fires burning in the same area. On Monday, roughly 22,000 residents jammed the city's main artery for hours after they were ordered to leave as the fire advanced, chewing up drought-stricken vegetation.

The National Weather Service warned that weather conditions through Wednesday would include low humidity, dry fuel and wind gusts up to 30 mph (48 kph).

"That's definitely not going to help the firefighting efforts," said Courtney Coats, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Forest Service.

The fire was 3 miles (5 kilometers) outside of South Lake Tahoe, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Battalion Chief Henry Herrera told KGO-TV.

South Lake Tahoe city officials said only a handful of residents defied Monday's evacuation order. But nearly everyone worried Tuesday about what the fire would do next.

"It just kind of sucks waiting. I mean, I know it's close down that way," said Russ Crupi, gesturing south from his home in the Heavenly Valley Estates mobile home park, which he and his wife manage for a living. He had arranged sprinklers and tractors around the neighborhood.

"I'm worried about what'll be here when people come back. People want to come back to their houses and that's what I'm going to try to do," he said.

Pushed by strong winds, the Caldor Fire crossed two major highways and burned mountain cabins as it swept down slopes into the Tahoe Basin. Thick smoke prevented air firefighting operations periodically last week. But since then, nearly two dozen helicopters and three air tankers dumped thousands of gallons of water and retardant on the fire, fire spokesman Dominic Polito said Tuesday.

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The threat of fire is so widespread that the U.S. Forest Service announced Monday that all national forests in California would be closed until Sept. 17.

Crews are battling the Dixie, the second-largest wildfire in state history at 1,260 square miles (3,267 square kilometers). The weeks-old fire was burning about 65 miles (105 kilometers) north of the Lake Tahoe-area blaze and prompting new evacuation orders and warnings this week.

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The last two wildfires that ripped through populated areas near Tahoe were the Angora Fire that destroyed more than 200 homes in 2007 and the Gondola Fire in 2002 that ignited near a chairlift at Heavenly Mountain Resort.

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