

The Washburn Fire in Yosemite is sending smoke all the way to Tahoe, and tourists are scrambling to change plans

By Gregory Thomas, Dustin Gardiner
San Francisco Chronicle, Tuesday, July 12, 2022

A wildfire burning across the southwest corner of Yosemite National Park has cast the vacation plans of thousands of park visitors into uncertainty during the peak of summer tourism.

By Tuesday night, the Washburn Fire, which ignited last week near Yosemite's famous Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias, had consumed more than 3,500 acres of forestland in the Sierra Nevada and containment had dropped from 22% to 17%.

The blaze closed one park entrance and sent very unhealthy smoke drifts north into Yosemite Valley, blotting out its famous granite features like Half Dome and El Capitan. Smoke from the fire drifted northward all the way to the Lake Tahoe basin, where people were beginning to worry about outdoor plans for the weekend.

Social media was abuzz with posts from prospective visitors wondering what to do.

"We're getting a lot of questions," said Rhonda Salisbury, CEO of Visit Yosemite Madera County.

The fire has taken a heavy toll on tourism in Fish Camp, a town of 49 people just outside Yosemite's shuttered south entrance. A giant cloud of smoke has loomed over the edge of town for days, and innkeepers are contending with an unusually small and restless crowd of summer tourists.

The Fish Camp General Store, which is known for its loaded sub sandwiches, is usually swamped in July because it's the last stop before visitors enter the park. But cashier Robyn Ubben said it's been oddly quiet.

"There can be a line for sandwiches the length of the store," she said Monday afternoon. "I've only had a handful of customers."

At the Narrow Gauge Inn, a Swiss-style lodge down the road, about half of the scheduled guests had canceled their reservations; only 12 of its 26 guest rooms were occupied on Monday. Devon Delacruz, the front desk clerk, reassured a young couple checking into their room that they could still get into Yosemite, provided they make the 2.5-hour drive to the park's west entrance.

She said many guests are disappointed after they traveled from out of state and other countries to see giant sequoias and other iconic sites.

"I feel terrible about that," Delacruz said. "We're 4 miles away — that's our appeal."

Some hotels in Madera and Mariposa counties near the fire zone were getting cancellations, tourism officials in those areas said. Many visitors were either rebooking their trips for later in the year or were moving to hotels farther from the fire and smoke.

"We try not to say, 'Come anyway' when it's smoky," Salisbury said. "When it's not good for people to be there, we don't want to invite them up."

Highway 41, the popular route into Yosemite's southern entrance at Wawona from Fresno, was closed in the area of the fire as hundreds of firefighters battled the blaze. Incoming park visitors were being rerouted along Highway 49 to Highway 140 via Mariposa, and traffic in the region was slow going, tourism officials said.

Most businesses in the gateway communities along Yosemite's western edge remained open. The Yosemite Mountain Sugar Pine Railroad, a popular tourist attraction that takes riders into the mountains, closed Sunday and Monday due to "excessive smoke" but reopened Tuesday.

Whether the park was receiving an abnormal number of day-use cancellations was unclear. Even with Yosemite's day-use reservation system, which is now in its third year, the park can receive upward of 10,000 visitors per day during the busy season from June through August.

The Washburn Fire is not Yosemite's only major wildfire event in recent years.

Two years ago, the park closed down for a week due to heavy smoke that lingered in Yosemite Valley — the first such closure in the park’s 130-year history. Parts of the park were also closed in 2018 due to the Ferguson Fire and in 2013 because of the Rim Fire.

The convergence of peak tourism and high wildfire threat should send a message to prospective Yosemite visitors, said Jonathan Farrington, Yosemite Mariposa County Tourism Bureau CEO and executive director.

“If you have the option to travel outside the summer, the more sustainable thing to do would be not to visit during the summer, from mid-June to mid-August,” Farrington said. “That’s when it’s busy. That’s when the Sierra Nevada is hot and not as pleasant.”

Visitors contemplating whether to make the journey to Yosemite this week or weekend are being urged to check the fire danger in the region, monitor smoke levels and air quality, and keep an open mind about what parts of the park are most appropriate to visit.

District Encourages Residents To Prepare For Smoke Impacts

The Riverbank News, Tuesday, July 12, 2022

The 2022 wildfire season has arrived in Central California with isolated grass and wildland fires threatening to bring smoke into the San Joaquin Valley. The Valley Air District is encouraging residents to be prepared and plan now for potential poor air quality due to wildfire smoke that will likely reach the Valley as we head into the hotter, drier time of the year.

The District reminds residents to change out air filters in their home and set up a Clean Air Room for when smoke impacts become severe. A Clean Air Room is a room in your home or apartment where you and your family can escape the worst of the smoke impacts from wildfires. Follow these easy steps to create a Clean Air Room:

1. Choose a room where your entire family can relax and spend the majority of their time.
2. Prevent smoke from entering the room by tightly closing doors and windows.
3. Stay cool. Run fans, window air conditioners or central air conditioning.
4. Filter the air in the room with a store-bought air purifier or create a DIY air purifier.
5. Avoid creating smoke or other particles indoors (no candles, no open flame cooking, no smoking).
6. Spend as much time as possible in the clean air room to get the most benefits.
7. Remember cloths mask don’t work for wildfire smoke, choose N95 masks instead.

The recent hot and dry conditions throughout the San Joaquin Valley create the potential for wildfires and lead to smoke impacts in the region. A build-up of dry vegetation during the summer months presents a high risk for hotter, faster-moving fires in mountain communities surrounding the Valley, often sending smoke into the San Joaquin Valley.

Wildfire smoke contains particulate matter (PM), which can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke. Those with existing respiratory conditions are especially susceptible to the adverse health effects of this form of pollution. Anyone experiencing poor air quality due to wildfire smoke should move indoors to a filtered, air-conditioned environment with windows closed and contact their primary care provider for more information.

The public can check the District’s wildfire page at www.valleyair.org/wildfires for information about any current wildfires affecting the Valley. In addition, anyone can follow air quality conditions by downloading the free “Valley Air” app on their mobile device. Those residents in foothill or mountain communities should also listen to emergency alerts and be prepared to evacuate if needed.

For more information, visit www.valleyair.org or call the District office in Modesto at 209-557-6400.

The Valley Air District covers eight counties including San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and San Joaquin Valley air basin portions of Kern.

Yosemite wildfire grows, but giant sequoias remain protected

By Associated Press

Business Journal, Tuesday, July 12, 2022

(AP) — A wildfire on the edge of a grove of California's giant sequoias in Yosemite National Park grew overnight but remained partially contained Tuesday.

The 6-day-old fire was not expected to make a significant advance into the famed Mariposa Grove, an official told a community meeting Monday evening.

"Overall it's in a very good place," said Matt Ahearn, the incident management team's tactical operations commander.

Yosemite forest ecologist and firefighter Garrett Dickman also expressed optimism in an interview with SFGATE.com after surveying the western part of the grove on Sunday.

"I walked through all the parts that burned and did not see any mortality. ... Some of the trees had some burn on them, but the level of burn was well within their ability to handle it," Dickman said.

The Washburn Fire at the south end of the park covered about 5 square miles (13 square kilometers) but was still 22% contained Tuesday morning, according to an incident update.

The fire has been burning since Thursday, when visitors reported smoke near Washburn Trail in the area of Mariposa Grove, a stand of hundreds of iconic trees that includes the 3,000-year-old Grizzly Giant.

The next day, hundreds of visitors and residents were evacuated from the nearby community of Wawona, but the rest of Yosemite has remained open.

Sprinklers were set up in the grove to protect the ancient trees, and a structure protection group of firefighters prepared defenses for Wawona.

The fire generally has burned to the north and east, away from the grove.

Conditions have been hot and dry but winds have been light.

Ahearn, the tactical operations commander, described extensive work by firefighters to cut off the fire's movements in difficult terrain.

"We're feeling very confident with the plan but we are being challenged with the plan," he said. "All crews are fully engaged, fully supportive, fighting fire very aggressive."

Ahearn expressed optimism about keeping the famous grove safe from the fire.

"It's out on the outer skirts of the Mariposa Grove," Ahearn said. "It has backed a little ways into that, but it hasn't backed intensely into the grove."

Ahearn said firefighters have been clearing around the bases of the trees.

"We fully do not see fire advancing (in) from this point where we're currently at," he said.

Firefighters had cut by hand a containment line across the entire northern edge of Mariposa Grove, he said.

Firefighters were mindful of the possibility the flames could move farther east and south, which could bracket one end of the grove.

The fire's cause remained under investigation but authorities consider it human-caused because there was no obvious natural spark

The giant sequoias, native in only about 70 groves spread along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, were once considered impervious to flames but have become increasingly vulnerable as wildfires, fueled by a buildup of undergrowth from a century of fire suppression and the impact of drought exacerbated by climate change, have become more intense and destructive.

Lightning-sparked wildfires over the past two years have killed up to a fifth of the estimated 75,000 large sequoias, which are the biggest trees by volume and a major draw for tourists.

A fierce windstorm ripped through the grove more than a year ago and toppled 15 giant sequoias, along with countless other trees.

The downed trees, in addition to massive numbers of pines killed by bark beetles, provided ample fuel for the flames.

In Utah, smoke and ash emanating from a growing wildfire in rural Tooele County blew into Salt Lake City on Saturday. By Monday night, the Jacob City Fire had grown to 6.4 square miles (16.6 square kilometers), with 19% containment, officials said.

Elsewhere in Utah, firefighters contending with heavy winds battled the 15.9 square-mile (41-square-kilometer) Halfway Hill Fire in Filmore. Law enforcement on Saturday arrested four men who investigators said abandoned a campfire that ignited the blaze.

So far in 2022, over 35,000 wildfires have burned nearly 4.7 million acres (1.9 million hectares) in the U.S., according to the National Interagency Fire Center, well above average for both wildfires and acres burned.

Yosemite wildfire threatens grove of iconic sequoia trees

The largest grove of giant sequoias in Yosemite National Park is still closed as firefighters battle a blaze that threatens the trees and has forced hundreds of campers to evacuate

By AP

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, July 13, 2022

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, Calif. (AP) — The largest grove of giant sequoias in Yosemite National Park remained closed Saturday as firefighters battled a blaze that threatened the gathering of the iconic trees and forced hundreds of campers to evacuate.

The rest of the park in California remained open, though smoke that hung in the air obscured some of the most scenic vistas and views.

More than 500 mature sequoias were threatened in the Mariposa Grove but as of Saturday afternoon there were no reports of severe damage to any named trees, including the 3,000-year-old Grizzly Giant.

The cause of the fire was under investigation.

Beyond the trees, the small community of Wawona, which is surrounded by park and a campground, was under threat, with people ordered to leave their homes and campsites on Friday night.

The fire was proving difficult to contain, with firefighters throwing "every tactic imaginable" at it, said Nancy Phillipe, a Yosemite fire information spokesperson. That included air drops of fire retardant as well as the planned use of bulldozers to create fire lines, a tactic that's rarely used in a wilderness setting like Yosemite, Phillipe said.

The bulldozers would primarily be used to put in fire lines to protect Wawona, she said. About 600 to 700 people who were staying at the Wawona campground in tents, cabins and an historic hotel were ordered to leave.

Though firefighters were facing hot and dry conditions, they didn't have to contend with intense winds on Saturday, said Jeffrey Barlow, senior meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Hanford. Given the relatively small size of the fire and minimal winds, smoke impacts were not expected to stretch far beyond the park, he said.

The giant sequoias, native in only about 70 groves spread along the western slope of California's Sierra Nevada range, were once considered impervious to flames but have become increasingly vulnerable as wildfires fueled by a buildup of undergrowth from a century of fire suppression and drought exacerbated by climate change have become more intense and destructive.

Lightning-sparked wildfires over the past two years have killed up to a fifth of the estimated 75,000 large sequoias, which are the biggest trees by volume.

There was no obvious natural spark for the fire that broke out Thursday next to the park's Washburn Trail, Phillippe said. Smoke was reported by visitors walking in the grove that reopened in 2018 after a \$40 million renovation that took three years.

The fire had grown to about 1.9 square miles (4.8 square kilometers) by Saturday evening.

A fierce windstorm ripped through the grove a year-and-a-half ago and toppled 15 giant sequoias, along with countless other trees.

The downed trees, along with massive numbers of pines killed by bark beetles, provided ample fuel for the flames.

The park has used prescribed burns to clear brush around the sequoias, which helps protect them if flames spread farther into the grove.

Meanwhile, most evacuation orders were lifted Saturday in the Sierra foothills about 80 miles (128 kilometers) to the northwest of the Yosemite fire, where a fire broke out on July 4. The Electra Fire that began near Jackson was mostly contained, and only areas directly within the fire's perimeter remained under evacuation orders, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

This story was first published on July 9, 2022. It was updated on July 10, 2022, to correct inaccurate information from a park spokesperson. Trees at the park were not wrapped in fire-resistant foil.

Ban on fireworks

By Elaine Fleeman

I agree with Mark Pearse that all currently legal fireworks, except possibly when a show is done by professionals, should be banned for the following reasons:

1) Fire hazards, especially in the summer when vegetation is extremely dry during the drought. Several large fires, some with loss of life and property, have been started by pyrotechnics. I watched innumerable illegal aerial fireworks being set off near a field of dry grass on July 4 because some don't care about the law or other people.

2) Injuries to people setting off the fireworks and to bystanders. I have seen even legal fireworks explode and one man was killed by an illegal aerial firework in Montebello on July 4. At least three people died in the U.S. from fireworks over the holiday weekend. Thousands are injured by fireworks each year, and it's all preventable.

3) Loud noises, which stress animals and people, especially those with PTSD. The loud explosions start in June and go late into the night near us causing loss of sleep as well.

4) Extremely hazardous air pollution, which can kill those with respiratory illnesses and shorten the lives of others. The July 6 edition of The Californian had an article concerning the massive amount of PM 2.5, soot, ash and even toxic heavy metals in our air. We work the rest of the year to make our air clean only to poison everyone in early July with toxic chemicals and particles in the air.

Fireworks in the hands of non-professionals is too often a literal matter of life and death. Could we please have drone shows instead?

— Elaine Fleeman, Bakersfield