

Wildfire breaks out on Highway 140 near Mariposa after vehicle crashes off roadway

By Jim Guy

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, July 19, 2022

A wildfire erupted Monday afternoon just west of Mariposa, not too far from Yosemite National Park, according to Cal Fire.

Initial reports say the Agua Fire happened after a vehicle drove off the roadway and crashed. A column of smoke was visible for several miles after the incident, reported about 1 p.m. off Highway 140 and Agua Fria Road.

As of about 8 a.m. Tuesday the fire had burned about 300 acres and was 20% contained, according to Cal Fire.

The Mariposa County Sheriff's Office is asking that the area be avoided.

Mariposa County published evacuation information shortly after the fire erupted. There was an evacuation order for all of Agua Fria and Gold Leaf roads.

Road closures included Agua Fria Road, Highway 140 from Yaqui Gulch to Hummingbird Lane, and Gold Leaf Road.

The closure of Highway 140 will force drivers heading to or from Yosemite from the south to use Highway 49 from Mariposa to Oakhurst and Highway 41 to Fresno.

A Red Cross evacuation center was established in Mariposa at the New Life Christian Church at 5089 Cold Road.

The Agua Fire is one of two wildfires currently burning in the Yosemite region.

The Washburn Fire, which ignited during the afternoon of July 7 near the Washburn Trail in the Mariposa Grove area of the national park, had burned more than 4,900 acres as of Monday morning and was about 50% contained.

The cause of the Washburn Fire remains under investigation.

Second wildfire near Yosemite threatens structures, causes evacuations

By Tim Sheehan

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, July 19, 2022

Dozens of structures are threatened and one of the main routes into Yosemite National Park is closed by a wildfire in Mariposa County started with an automobile crash Monday afternoon.

The Agua Fire is estimated at about 343 acres, Cal Fire information officer Jaime Williams said Tuesday. Containment grew from about 10% on Monday night to about 20% by Tuesday morning.

"The crews did an excellent job (Monday) and throughout the evening," Williams said. "Today is going to be all about reinforcing the lines."

The fire began shortly after 1 p.m. Monday along Highway 140 west of Mariposa when a vehicle went off the roadway and crashed, investigators said. Highway 140, one of three main routes from the San Joaquin Valley into Yosemite National Park, has been closed between Agua Fria Road and Bumgardner Road west of the mountain town of Mariposa.

Travelers heading to Yosemite National Park can still reach Highway 140 via Highway 49 to Mariposa.

From where the fire started along Highway 140 near Agua Fria Road, the wildfire has grown primarily to the east. A Cal Fire map issued early Tuesday shows the fire's eastern perimeter creeping to within about a mile of Mariposa.

"It's burning in brushy oak woodland, and some of the area is extremely rocky and steep," Williams said. "We're heading into the summer months under extreme drought conditions, so the vegetation is very receptive to spot fires and new starts."

More than 170 firefighters are assigned to the Agua Fire, including 31 engine crews and three water tenders, two helicopters, three bulldozers and four hand crews.

Evacuation orders issued Monday afternoon remained in place Tuesday morning for areas along Agua Fria Road, Gold Leaf Road, Yaqui Gulch Road, Paso del Oso Road, Oak Canyon Drive, and Bumgardner Road from Highway 140 to the top of a hill at the edge of Mariposa.

"We do still have some fire activity within the (fire's) perimeter, where there is heavy vegetation that continues to burn," Williams said.

No estimate has been made as to when Highway 140 may reopen or when residents in evacuated areas can return to their homes. To date, no structures have been damaged or destroyed, and no injuries have been reported among firefighters or civilians.

An inversion layer Tuesday morning was keeping smoke from the fire settled into lower areas in the mountain areas near Mariposa, Williams said. When that weather lid lifts in the afternoons, smoke rises higher in the sky. Smoke in the mountains was already a concern because of the Washburn Fire, which has burned in nearby Yosemite National Park since July 7.

Yosemite wildfire update: Helicopters carrying something other than water made for 'big day'

By Tim Sheehan

Fresno Bee, Tuesday, July 19, 2022

Firefighters continue to make progress in their efforts to keep a wildfire burning in Yosemite National Park and the neighboring Sierra National Forest in check, increasing and strengthening containment lines around the blaze.

The Washburn Fire was estimated at 4,911 acres on Tuesday morning, unchanged from the previous day's estimates by the National Park Service and the National Interagency Fire Center.

Containment increased to 58%, an improvement of 8 percentage points from Monday when containment lines had been established and secured around 50% of the fire's perimeter.

Matt Ahearn, deputy operations chief with the state's Interagency Incident Management Team that is coordinating the efforts, described Monday as "a big day" for specialized hotshot firefighting crews at the eastern edge of the fire. That's been the most active growth area of the Washburn Fire over the past week.

Using pumps that were airlifted by helicopter into the Iron Creek drainage south of the Merced River's south Fork, in the Sierra National Forest, hotshot crews have secured the volatile northeast corner of the fire as well as the corner to the south, near Mount Raymond. "We have lines down through Iron Creek," Ahearn said Tuesday. "We just need to secure it."

Along the fire's northern edge, along the south fork of the Merced River, other hotshot crews have been working with pumps to ensure that flames don't spread north of the river.

The fire began July 7 along the Washburn Trail within the park's Mariposa Grove of iconic giant sequoia trees. In and around the grove, which contains more than 500 mature sequoias, containment lines are secure and crews have been mopping up areas that continue to smolder.

Additional containment lines are considered secure along the western perimeter of the fire along Wawona Road (Highway 41 from the Mariposa Grove Road up to the community of Wawona and the south fork of the Merced River.

The success along the western front enabled fire managers to allow Wawona residents to return to their homes Sunday after being evacuated for more than a week.

Ahearn said fire lines are also holding well the ridge of Mount Raymond, but added that crews are continuing to work on contingency lines to the south and east by shoring up road systems and creating bulldozer and hand lines within the Sierra National Forest.

The southern area of Yosemite National Park remains closed to the general public. That includes the South Entrance from Highway 41, the Mariposa Grove, and Wawona Road between the park entrance and Wawona, because of the ongoing firefighting efforts, both on the ground and in the air.

A forest closure is also in effect for the northwestern area of the Sierra National Forest adjacent to the park.

Almost 1,600 firefighters remain assigned to the Washburn Fire, and resources include 35 hand crews, 74 fire engines, and 15 helicopters.

The estimated cost of the firefighting effort to date is more than \$21 million. The cause of the fire remains under investigation.

SHARE CLUES TO FIRE'S ORIGIN

People who were in or near the Mariposa Grove on the afternoon of July 7 and have information about the fire's ignition can provide tips by calling or sending a text message to the National Park Service's investigative branch at 888-6563-0009, by email to nps_isb@nps.gov, or online at nps.gov/orgs/1563/submit-a-tip.htm.

Fire crews are also working another fire that began Monday in Mariposa County, about 5 miles west of the Washburn Fire. The Agua Fire was sparked Monday afternoon after a vehicle drove off the roadway and crashed just west of Mariposa near Highway 140 and Agua Fria Road.

As of Tuesday, the Agua Fire was estimated at about 343 acres and 20% contained, according to Cal Fire, the state's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Wildfires continue to impact air quality in Central Valley

By Anthony Wright

23abc, Monday, July 18, 2022

(KERO) — With wildfires burning across California another impact of these blazes is the air quality. Valley Air District Control is reminding us that smoke from wildfires set hundred of miles away can reach the valley.

Officials say what they're typically most concerned about is our ozone which is that haze we often see polluting our air. But in more recent years the concern has shifted toward pollution from wildfire smoke which contains particulate matter that can trigger asthma attacks, aggravates chronic bronchitis, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.

"We're really seeing a lot more of the wildfire impacts. We just don't always know what's in that smoke. We can see air quality levels reach even the hazardous range," said one expert.

The Air District says the best way to protect yourself during poor air quality days is to use an air filter in your home and make sure you're changing the filter too.