

'This incident is massive in nature.' Creek Fire grows to 143,900 acres, 65 structures destroyed

By Sheyanne N Romero and David Rodriguez
Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, September 8, 2020

The Creek Fire grew to 143,929 acres and remains 0% contained.

Fire officials announced that 65 structures were damaged, including 45 homes. There are 5,296 structures threatened.

"This fire has already hit us hard. We know there's been structure loss. I know on the forest staff, personally, there's been loss of homes," said Dean Gould, Sierra National Forest supervisor on Monday night. "This one has hit harder and more emotionally than perhaps all those others."

While Gould spoke on the emotional firefighting efforts underway, a helicopter crew unsuccessfully attempted to rescue roughly 60 of hikers and campers trapped at Lake Edison and China Peak. Fresno Fire Department reported that one person had died. However, the man's death is not connected to the Creek Fire.

"Sunday evening, an older gentleman arrived at Vermillion Store, located on Edison Road in Mono Hot Springs," said Tony Botti, spokesman for Fresno County Sheriff's Department. "The man collapsed due to a medical episode. Life-saving measures were taken, but he ended up passing away."

Paramedics weren't able to respond to the location immediately and plans are underway to fly the body out.

By Tuesday morning, 100-plus people were rescued by the California National Guard. Rescue efforts continue for the Creek Fire.

More than 1,000 fighters are at the incident and there are now two Type 1 incident command teams, a rarity. Cal Fire and Great Basin Incident Command Team 1 will be working together to manage the incident.

"That should be a message to all of you, just how seriously both federal leadership and state leadership are taking this incident," Gould said. "Do know that they understand the challenges. They understand the needs."

he fire was ignited Friday night near the San Joaquin River and the communities of Big Creek and Huntington Lake. Fresno and Madera counties issued a slew of mandatory evacuation orders, which will remain in effect for the time being.

On Monday night, volunteer firefighter Brian Fowlie worked alongside his crew to protect homes in North Fork.

Fowlie lives in the community and had been on duty for 48 hours.

"We're here because we want to be," he said. "It's tough, physically. You're breathing the smoke. Your feet hurt. Your knees hurt... But we're not going home until we're done."

Although he was unsure what the night would bring, he and the crew were ready.

"We're first responders. This is what we do," he said. "These houses, these are all part of our community."

He described the feeling of being able to protect his community as "pretty exhilarating."

The town was evacuated on Monday and at least one home had already been destroyed, but crews managed to save the rest.

"We have sustained pretty heavy structure loss," said Nick Truax, an incident commander with Cal Fire. "Normally, we try to get our damage inspections started in the first couple of days in an incident like this. It's going to take a little bit longer."

Crews are still in a "massive firefight" in areas where structural damage has occurred. Fallen trees and debris have also made it difficult for crews to assess structure loss.

Timber has roughly 80 to 90% tree mortality from the bark beetle, according to Cal Fire.

Additionally, much of the firefighting efforts have been focused on saving lives and getting people to safety.

"I know everyone wants to know the status of their structures," Truax said. "You're going to have to give us just a little bit of time. We are definitely working on it and it is a priority of ours."

The fire continues to grow in most areas and crews have been asked to focus on saving life and property.

Creek Fire Evacuation Orders:

- Bass Lake Basin
- The town of North Fork and surrounding areas - Rd. 221, Rd. 222, Rd. 226, and Rd. 200 and all tributary roads are included.
- Shaver Lake down to Cressman Road, including Cressman Road
- Big Creek
- Huntington Lake
- Camp Sierra
- High Sierra areas, which include: Florence Lake, Ward Lake, Portal Forebay, Edison Lake, Mono Hot Springs, Kaiser and all campgrounds.
- The area west of Tollhouse, along Auberry Road west to Powerhouse Road.
- Alder Springs, Mile High, Meadow Lakes, Big Sandy, Mono Wind Casino, Jose Basin and Italian Bar.
- Dinkey Creek, Wishon & Courtright Reservoirs.
- Tollhouse Road at Peterson Road down to Lodge Road
- Beal Fire Road
- Powerhouse Road to the San Joaquin River
- Entire town of Auberry, which extends from the San Joaquin River on Powerhouse Road to Auberry Road in both directions out to Hwy. 168. This includes the points next to Prather and next to Cressman's General Store.
- Cascadel Road (and all off-shoots), Peckinpah Rd., Mission Rd., Douglas Rd., South Fork, Tu Nobi, Rd. 225 from Cascadel to Italian Bar.
- Sycamore Road and Burrough Valley
- Watts Valley from Maxon Road to Pittman Hill Road
- Maxon Road to Trimmer Springs Road.

Evacuation warnings:

- Areas east of Highway 41 in Oakhurst, Coarsegold, O'Neals
- All residents living in the Prather/Auberry areas

Two evacuation centers have been established by the American Red Cross at Oakhurst Community Center, 39800 Fresno Flats Rd., and Clovis North High School, 2770 E. International Ave., Fresno.

Red Cross has established a hotline for shelter information at 571-595-7401. Text your zip code to 888-777 for text alerts.

The Clovis Rodeo Grounds are open to large animals displaced by the Creek Fire. The rodeo grounds are located at 748 Rodeo Drive in downtown Clovis.

For missing persons call:

- **Fresno County Sheriff's Office** - (559) 600-3111
- **Madera County Sheriff's Office** - (559) 658-2555

Creek Fire: Air quality impacted as fire continues to grow

By Dale Yurong

ABC30, Monday, September 7, 2020

FRESNO, Calif. - Smoke from the fast-moving Creek Fire was expected to continue to pour into the valley for the next few days. Large pieces of ash have been visible.

This latest fire has added to our poor air quality.

Jessica Olsen of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said, "As you kind of saw overnight, you can see it especially here in Fresno and in the Clovis area at least in particular right now, a lot of that smoke has started to come down the mountain. You'll see tomorrow (Tuesday), unfortunately, we're just going to continue to see those impacts."

Satellite images from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration showed how smoke from both the SQF Complex and Creek Fires moved 40 miles east into Bishop on Sunday. The Air Quality Index there was 449.

A reading of 151 was enough to put a community into the unhealthy range.

The wind direction this week has now changed near the Creek Fire.

Olsen explained, "We've been under this high pressure that's trapped a lot of these emissions really from the past several weeks, but now with the winds changing and going from east to west, that fire smoke is really gonna be directly sort of pushed into the valley."

Because of the worsening air, doctors are urging people to try to spend as much time as they can indoors.

Fresno Allergist Dr. Praveen Buddiga said, "The impact on the valley is huge because it's right in our backyard. Right in the neighborhood."

Dr. Buddiga is worried about people dealing with respiratory issues like asthma and COPD.

He said, "I would emphasize they take their medicines, take their inhalers, rinse out their sinuses. Sinus rinse because that ash is really, really going to bother them."

Dr. Buddiga added patients have complained of wheezing, coughing and difficulty breathing. He urged people to seek medical help if their conditions worsened.

Extreme heat, 'critical' fire danger on Labor Day as gusty winds hit Northern California

By Michael McGough

Sacramento Bee, Monday, Sept. 7, 2020

A Red Flag Warning is used to call attention to limited weather conditions that could result in extreme burning conditions. By Alyssa Hodenfield

Extreme heat is continuing in Northern California on Labor Day, with a high of 110 degrees in Sacramento's forecast after Sunday set a September record of 109.

Heat, dry conditions and gusty winds in the forecast have also prompted the National Weather Service to issue a red flag warning due to serious wildfire risk, in effect Monday night through Tuesday night for essentially all of the Sacramento Valley, patches of the greater Bay Area and much of the Sierra Nevada foothills.

Gusts could range from 30 mph in the valley to 50 mph or higher in the foothills, with poor overnight humidity recovery making fire risk even worse, according to the NWS, which in a tweet called the expected conditions “critical.”

Thousands of fire personnel continue to grapple with hundreds of wildfires throughout California that sparked mid-August, charring well over 1.5 million acres, according to Cal Fire and the U.S. Forest Service.

One of the most dangerous recent wildfires, the Creek Fire in Fresno County, already exploded in size over the weekend, growing to nearly 80,000 acres with no containment since sparking Friday evening. The blaze trapped hundreds in the Mammoth Pool Reservoir; they had to be rescued by helicopter and about 20 were flown to local hospitals.

the possibility of widespread power outages later Monday.

California’s Independent System Operator, which runs the state electricity grid, reached a Stage 2 emergency Sunday night but avoided rolling blackouts that could have affected up to 3 million households. Separately, Pacific Gas and Electric is warning of possible “public safety power shutoffs” in 17 counties Monday night as fierce wind gusts are expected to intensify wildfire risks. A total of 103,000 homes and businesses could be affected. As of 11 a.m., PG&E hadn’t announced a decision regarding a public safety shutoff.

The current heat wave has shattered records throughout California. The Cal Poly weather station in San Luis Obispo County recorded a jaw-dropping 120 degrees — the hottest reading there ever, breaking a mark of 115 set in a 2017 heat wave.

Sacramento smashed a pair of daily records Sunday. Its stations at Sacramento Executive Airport and downtown each hit 109 degrees, breaking respective records of 103 and 105 degrees. The downtown record for Sept. 6 had stood for 97 years, according to the NWS. The readings tied with Sept. 1, 2017, and Sept. 1-2, 1950, as the city’s hottest September day of all time.

Skies remain hazy and air quality has been poor throughout various parts of the state due to fires. Sacramento air quality has varied day to day as winds shift.

By 10:30 a.m. Monday, the temperature had already hit 85 degrees, despite wildfire haze blocking some sunlight. The AQI reading for downtown was below 100, but was at 147 in Elk Grove and above 130 in Davis, according to SpareTheAir.com. An AQI reading between 101 and 150 is deemed unhealthy for sensitive groups, while 151 to 200 is considered unhealthy for the general population.

California wildfires set record as more than 2 million acres are scorched

By Cynthia Dizikes and Sarah Ravani

San Francisco Chronicle, Monday, September 7, 2020

Fire crews battled numerous blazes across the state Monday as high temperatures and ominous winds meant thousands of people across California were facing expected power shut-offs.

With the new fires roaring over the holiday weekend, flames have burned more than 2 million acres in California this year, setting a dismal record.

The fires forced evacuations and the closure of national forests throughout the state and prompted daring rescues, highlighting the extremes that this year’s fire season has brought. The new blazes came even as firefighters gained a handle on the big fire complexes burning around the Bay Area.

New evacuations were ordered for Fresno and Madera counties as firefighters struggled to get a handle on the Creek Fire, a massive, fast-moving blaze that scorched dried vegetation in the Sierra National Forest and threatened thousands of structures.

The Creek Fire exploded to 78,790 acres Monday — growing by more than 33,000 acres since Sunday — and was completely uncontained, according to Cal Fire. The fire continued to threaten 5,296 structures. The cause of the fire is under investigation.

The blaze isn't going away anytime soon. Firefighters expect to reach full containment of the Creek Fire by Oct. 15, but the fire is still burning rapidly because of "dead and downed material," Cal Fire said. Some 80% to 90% of the trees in the area where the fire is raging have died because of the ravages of the bark beetle.

Cal Fire said 14,800 firefighters were battling 23 major fires in the state, the Associated Press reported. California has seen 900 wildfires since Aug. 15, many of them started by an intense series of thousands of lightning strikes. There have been eight fire deaths and more than 3,300 structures destroyed.

The previous record for acres burned was set in 2018. Fires that year burned 1.98 million acres and killed more than 100, most of them in the deadly Camp Fire that burned through the Butte County town of Paradise.

Because of "unprecedented and dangerous fire conditions" and limited firefighting resources, all campsites and day-use sites in national forests were temporarily closed throughout the state, according to the Forest Service. Campfires, gas stoves and any other kind of ignition source were also banned.

The U.S. Forest Service announced Monday that the Stanislaus, Sierra, Sequoia, Inyo, Los Padres, Angeles, San Bernardino and Cleveland national forests in California would be closed indefinitely because of fire danger.

In the Sierra National Forest, hundreds of trapped people had to be rescued by helicopter Saturday afternoon from the Mammoth Pool Reservoir northeast of Fresno after the Creek Fire blocked the only road leading out of the area.

Pilots with the California National Guard said the flying conditions were the most difficult they'd ever faced — smoke choked out visibility and the winds were gusting erratically. They had to use night vision goggles to see clearly.

"There were points along the route where we were just about ready to say that's enough, but right about that decision point, the visibility would get a little bit better, we could see the next ridge," Chief Warrant Officer Joseph Rosamond said at a Monday news briefing.

Reports on the number of people trapped at the lake kept growing, alerting them to how dire the situation was. When the officers arrived at the lake, all of the surrounding vegetation was in flames, they said. The crew prioritized evacuating burn victims and those with serious injuries who needed quick medical attention, packing as many people as could safely fit into the aircraft.

The ground rescue was preceded by the dramatic airlift of 214 people and 11 pets who were stranded in the area Saturday as the fire exploded through the dry forest and tore into the camping area.

Two helicopter crews on a Chinook and a Blackhawk flew through smoke, ash and heavy winds to rescue the campers. Twenty, some with burns and broken bones, had to be hospitalized. Two were seriously injured.

The remaining people trapped were rescued Sunday night, said Madera County Sheriff Tyson Pogue.

The U.S. Forest Service was able to get a ground crew through to evacuate about 20 people and 15 dogs. A few horses were left behind and were expected to be brought out Monday, according to the Sheriff's Office. No information was immediately available on injuries.

"It was very emotional, especially when I looked back and saw children that were the same age as my children," Rosamond said. "It just felt really good to be able to get them all out."

A rescue attempt by military pilots using night vision Monday evening to rescue hikers and campers trapped near China Peak and Lake Edison was unsuccessful, the Fresno Fire Department said Monday.

The Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias in Yosemite National Park was closed as a precaution Monday afternoon in case the Creek Fire crosses into the park, which remains open.

Thousands more people were evacuated in Fresno County. On Monday, Auberry and North Fork were placed under a mandatory evacuation order. Evacuation orders were also expanded to more mountain communities where firefighters worked through the night to save small towns as the fire roared.

Sheriff's deputies went door to door to make sure residents were complying with orders to leave. Officials hoped to keep the fire from pushing west into rural towns along Route 41 and possibly Yosemite.

The Creek Fire has charred more than 123 square miles of timber after breaking out Friday. The 850 firefighters on the scene had yet to get any containment after three days of work in sweltering heat.

Another fire in Mendocino County was reported early Monday afternoon. The Oak Fire quickly grew from 3 acres to 25 acres in the span of 10 minutes, forcing dozens of people out of their homes as mandatory evacuations were ordered for parts of the Willits and Covelo areas and closing a section of Highway 101. Cal Fire warned that the blaze has a "rapid rate of spread." By late Monday, the uncontained blaze had grown to 1,000 acres and damaged one structure.

Despite the heat and wind, firefighters were making progress at three other fires in Northern California, having contained about 80% of the CZU Lightning Complex raging across San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties and at least 91% of the fires involved in the LNU Lightning Complex, which is blazing in several counties. Meanwhile, the SCU Lightning Complex fires that have burned 396,624 acres in several counties, including Alameda, Santa Clara and Stanislaus, were 94% contained, according to Cal Fire.

Excessive heat warning issued for Modesto as Sunday's high expected to reach 108

By Brian Clark

Modesto Bee, Sunday, Sept. 06, 2020

An excessive heat warning has been issued for Stanislaus County and the Northern San Joaquin Valley through Tuesday at 6 p.m.

The expected high temperature in Modesto on Sunday is expected to reach 108 degrees, according to the National Weather Service.

That will likely surpass the record high of 103 for Sept. 6, set in 1977, according to the Modesto Irrigation District, which has been tracking daily temperatures since 1939. The record for maximum low temperature for today's date of 73 degrees set in 1998 also will likely be broken.

Sunday and Monday, when the high temperature is expected to be 107, would be the 18th and 19th days of 100 or higher temperatures this year. Last year, there were 12 days at 100 or above, and the highest yearly total since 2020 was in 2017, which saw 27 days of temperatures at 100 or more.

The blast of heat over the next few days will be unlike the heatwave last month, where Stanislaus County residents saw 100-plus temperatures for seven straight days. A high of 105 degrees is predicted for Tuesday with the high on Wednesday 98.

Meanwhile, the air quality in Stanislaus County on Sunday is expected to be unhealthy for sensitive groups, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Though no rolling blackouts are expected, MID is asking residents to conserve energy use between 3 p.m. and 9 p.m.

The weather service warns that "heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke can occur due to prolonged exposure to hot temperatures, even to the general population.

California fire sparked by device to reveal baby's gender

By Frank Baker, Associated Press

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Sept. 7, 2020

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A couple's plan to reveal their baby's gender went up not in blue or pink smoke but in flames when the device they used sparked a wildfire that burned thousands of acres and forced people to flee from a city east of Los Angeles.

The fire prompted evacuations in parts of Yucaipa, a city of 54,000, and the surrounding area. Water-dropping helicopters were brought in but the fire has proven stubborn — it grew to 11.5 square miles (30 square kilometers) by Monday morning and more than 500 firefighters on the scene only had minimal containment. No homes have burned and no injuries reported.

It's the latest in what has become a lengthy list of tragedies at events where typically smoke, confetti, balloons or other colored objects are used to reveal the soon-to-be-born child's biological sex — pink for girls and blue for boys. Sometimes the made-for-social-media gatherings are spectacles and include explosives and even guns, and at least one had deadly consequences.

The fire started Saturday morning at El Ranch Dorado Park, a rugged natural area popular with hikers and dog owners. In summer the park's tall natural grasses dry out and turn golden, and when combined with the San Bernardino Mountains in the distance, provide a popular backdrop for family photos and videos.

Wildfires have burned more than 2 million acres in California this year, setting a state record even as crews battled dozens of growing blazes Monday in sweltering temperatures.

The unidentified couple chose the location to reveal their baby's gender. They were accompanied by their young children and had a friend or relative videoing on a cell phone, said Capt. Bennet Milloy of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The family went into a field and fired off the device, which quickly ignited 4-foot (1.2 meter) grasses, Milloy said. Conditions were perfect for a fire to spread quickly — triple-digit temperatures, low humidity, dry vegetation and a stiff breeze.

Surveillance video showed the couple frantically race to their vehicle to retrieve water bottles to try to extinguish the flames. It was futile and they called 911.

"You can't fight a fire like this with a water bottle," Milloy said. "They had no chance after it started."

Firefighters arrived within minutes and the distraught couple told them what happened and provided their own photos and video to aid the investigation, Milloy said.

"It's a pretty tragic situation," he said. "Obviously this was supposed to be a happy event."

The couple could be liable for the cost of fighting the fire and criminally charged with misdemeanor or felony counts.

In 2017, a massive Arizona wildfire was accidentally started by an off-duty Border Patrol agent who shot a target filled with an explosive blue powder. The fire burned 47,000 acres (73 square miles) and caused \$8 million in damages, Agent Dennis Dickey was charged with a misdemeanor and sentenced to probation.

Last year, a homemade explosive used to reveal a baby's gender killed 56-year-old Pamela Kreimeyer in Knoxville, Iowa. The device was meant to spray powder but instead blew up like a pipe bomb. Kreimeyer, who was standing 45 feet (13 meters) away, died instantly when debris struck her head.

Milloy said some devices used to reveal genders are harmless but others contain chemicals that produce heat and can spark fires.

He said the device used Saturday will be tested to determine what it contained. Milloy didn't know the color it emitted.

GET bus offering free rides Tuesday due to poor air quality

The Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Sept. 7, 2020

Golden Empire Transit District is offering free rides Tuesday because the air quality index is at 156. The free rides are available on GET fixed routes and GET-A-Lift all day.

An AQI over 150 is considered unhealthy and potentially hazardous to the general population. According to the EPA, the air quality index focuses on health effects people might experience within a few hours or days after breathing polluted air.

You can download the free San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District app to monitor air quality, the air district said. The app is available for free on the App Store (Valley Air District) and Google Play (Valley Air). This is the official app of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which monitors the AQI for the region.

Bakersfield Fire Department sends personnel to California wildfires

The Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Sept. 7, 2020

The Bakersfield Fire Department has sent personnel to two fires in California.

One Type 1 OES Engine has been assigned to the Castle Fire, and one incident management team member is assigned to the Red Salmon Fire, according to a BFD news release.

The local fire department said the Sequoia Complex is made up of the Castle and Shotgun fires, which were first reported Aug. 24. The majority of the Castle Fire is in the Sequoia National Forest, but it is also burning in the Inyo National Forest. A large portion of the Castle Fire is burning in the Golden Trout Wilderness Area. The Shotgun Fire is about five miles northwest of the Castle Fire.

As California burns, the winds arrive and the lights go out

By Marcio Jose Sanchez and Christopher Weber, Associated Press
Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Sept. 7, 2020

SHAVER LAKE, Calif. (AP) — New wildfires ravaged bone-dry California during a scorching Labor Day weekend that saw a dramatic airlift of more than 200 people trapped by flames and ended with the state's largest utility turning off power to 172,000 customers to try to prevent its power lines and other equipment from sparking more fires.

California is heading into what traditionally is the teeth of the wildfire season, and already it has set a record with 2 million acres burned this year. The previous record was set just two years ago and included the deadliest wildfire in state history — the Camp Fire that swept through the community of Paradise and killed 85 people.

That fire was started by Pacific Gas & Electric power lines. Liability from billions of dollars in claims from that and other fires forced the utility to seek bankruptcy protection. To guard against new wildfires and new liability, PG&E last year began preemptive power shutoffs when conditions are exceptionally dangerous.

That's the situation now in Northern California, where high and dry winds are expected until Wednesday. PG&E received criticism for its handling of planned outages last year. The utility said it has learned from past problems, "and this year will be making events smaller in size, shorter in length and smarter for customers."

Two of the three largest fires in state history are burning in the San Francisco Bay Area. More than 14,000 firefighters are battling those fires and about two dozen others around California.

The fire danger also is high in Southern California, where new fires were burning in Los Angeles, San Bernardino and San Diego counties. The U.S. Forest Service on Monday decided to close all eight national forests in the region and to shutter campgrounds statewide.

"The wildfire situation throughout California is dangerous and must be taken seriously," said Randy Moore, regional forester for the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region that covers California. "Existing fires are displaying extreme fire behavior, new fire starts are likely, weather conditions are worsening, and we simply do not have enough resources to fully fight and contain every fire."

Lynne Tolmachoff, spokeswoman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, said it's "unnerving" to have reached a record for acreage burned when September and October

usually are the worst months for fires because vegetation has dried out and high winds are more common.

While the two mammoth Bay Area fires were largely contained after burning for three weeks, firefighters struggled to corral several other major blazes ahead of the expected winds. Evacuation orders were expanded to more mountain communities Monday as the largest blaze, the Creek Fire, churned through the Sierra National Forest in Central California.

It was one of many recent major fires that has displayed terrifyingly swift movement. The fire moved 15 miles (24 kilometers) in a single day during the weekend and burned 56 square miles (145.04 square kilometers). Since starting Friday from an unknown cause, it has burned 212 square miles (549 square kilometers).

Debra Rios wasn't home Monday when the order came to evacuate her hometown of Auberry, just northeast of Fresno. Sheriff's deputies went to her ranch property to pick up her 92-year-old mother, Shirley MacLean. They reunited at an evacuation center.

"I hope like heck the fire doesn't reach my little ranch," Rios said. "It's not looking good right now. It's an awfully big fire."

Mountain roads saw a steady stream of cars and trucks leaving the community of about 2,300 on Monday afternoon.

Firefighters working in steep terrain saved the tiny town of Shaver Lake from flames that roared down hillsides toward a marina. About 30 houses were destroyed in the remote hamlet of Big Creek, resident Toby Wait said.

"About half the private homes in town burned down," he said. "Words cannot even begin to describe the devastation of this community."

A school, church, library, historic general store and a major hydroelectric plant were spared in the community of about 200 residents, Wait told the Fresno Bee.

Sheriff's deputies went door to door to make sure residents were complying with orders to leave. Officials hoped to keep the fire from pushing west toward Yosemite National Park.

On Saturday, National Guard rescuers in two military helicopters airlifted 214 people to safety after flames trapped them in a wooded camping area near Mammoth Pool Reservoir. Two people were seriously injured and were among 12 hospitalized.

On Monday night, a military helicopter tried but failed to land near Lake Edison to rescue people trapped by the fire, the Fresno Fire Department said on Twitter. The department tweeted that "military pilots tried valiantly to land but heavy smoke conditions prevented a safe approach, another effort will be made shortly to evacuate the trapped people in Lake Edison and China Peak using night vision."

Chief Warrant Officer Joseph Rosamond, the pilot of a Chinook helicopter, said visibility was poor and winds increasingly strong during the three flights he made into the fire zone during the operation that started late Saturday and stretched into Sunday. His crew relied on night-vision goggles to search for a landing spot near a boat launch where flames came within 50 feet (15.24 meters) of the aircraft.

The injured, along with women and children, took priority on the first airlift, which filled both helicopters to capacity, he said.

"We started getting information about how many people were out there, how many people to expect, and that number kept growing. So we knew that it was a dire situation," Rosamond said.

In Southern California, crews scrambled to douse several fires that roared to life in searing temperatures, including one that closed mountain roads in Angeles National Forest and forced the evacuation of the historic Mount Wilson Observatory. Late Monday night, the Los Angeles County Fire Department told residents of Duarte, Bradbury and Monrovia near the forest to get ready for a possible evacuation.

Cal Fire said a blaze in San Bernardino County called the El Dorado Fire started Saturday morning and was caused by a smoke-generating pyrotechnic device used by a couple to reveal their baby's gender. In eastern San Diego County, a fire destroyed at least 10 structures after burning 16 square miles (41.44

square kilometers) and prompting evacuations near the remote community of Alpine in the Cleveland National Forest.

California has seen 900 wildfires since Aug. 15, many of them started by an intense series of thousands of lightning strikes in mid-August. There have been eight fire deaths and more than 3,300 structures destroyed.

The Red and Salmon Fires are burning on the Klamath, Six Rivers and Shasta-Trinity National Forests within Humboldt, Siskiyou and Trinity counties, according to BFD, which has sent one person to provide leadership and oversight on an incident management team.

‘We thought we were going to die’: Survivors tell harrowing tales of explosive Creek Fire

By Rusty Simmons and Matthias Gafni
San Francisco Chronicle, Sunday, September 6, 2020

FRESNO — Saul Hernandez heard the fire was on the other side of the mountain, so the heavy smoke and crimson sun didn't bother him much Saturday at the popular Mammoth Pool Reservoir in Fresno County.

But by the afternoon, he saw flames higher than the treetops whipping around the lake. The one route in and out was burning, and trees were falling across the roadway, trapping campers.

Hernandez, a 26-year-old Los Angeles resident on his first camping trip with his buddy, abandoned their campsite, tent and car and jumped into the water, wading waist deep as the monster Creek Fire gobbled up trees and brush.

“The smoke and debris was just coming out of nowhere and hitting us. We tried to cover our eyes and mouths and duck, but it was difficult to breathe,” Hernandez recalled as he stood with two pairs of shoes slung over his shoulder outside a Fresno evacuation center. “It felt like we were sitting in an oven.”

Then help came. Two helicopter crews from a Chinook and a Blackhawk — pilots donning night vision goggles — braved the darkness, smoke, ash and heavy winds to land nearby, evacuating 214 people and 11 pets in six trips. Twenty campers, some with burns and broken bones, had to be hospitalized. Two were seriously injured, Army National Guard Col. David Hall said.

Madera County Sheriff Tyson Pogue said a Chinook took 65 people on its first trip, and as conditions degraded, they piled 100 people on board for a second trip, fearing they could not return again.

“By a stroke of luck, they were able to get back a third time and get the last people,” Pogue said. A small handful of stragglers remained, including a couple who turned down the helicopter ride, he said.

The fire, even among this state's recent record-setting blazes, left first responders aghast at how swiftly it ballooned to more than 73,000 acres after starting Friday. It crossed the San Joaquin River and devoured Sierra National Forest wildland devastated by drought and bark beetle infestation.

By Sunday, with the Creek Fire raging, the state set a new record for most acres burned in California for one year, eclipsing 2 million acres, almost the size of Puerto Rico. The previous record was 1.96 million acres in 2018. Cal Fire began recording in 1987.

The scariest part, said Lynne Tolmachoff, a Cal Fire spokeswoman, is that the worst months are yet to come.

“It is a frightening thought. We've had bad years before, but this is different,” she said. “And we've just hit September. September and October have historically been two of our worst months.”

The National Weather Services issued a red flag warning, in effect until late Monday, for an area of California that includes the Creek Fire. It cited “hot and dry conditions with locally gusty winds.”

Sheriff Pogue called the Creek Fire a “hellish firestorm,” made worse by the vulnerable, diseased forest. The global pandemic didn’t help, either: Since the shelter-in-place health orders, Pogue said the Sierra National Forest and its recreational areas have seen unprecedented crowds, including many people who would normally visit nearby Yosemite National Park — the southern part of which is also threatened by the blaze.

“It’s like Fourth of July-size crowds up here every day of the week,” Pogue said.

Some got trapped Sunday by the fast-spreading flames. Alyssa Flores, a correspondent with Fresno’s ABC affiliate, [tweeted](#) Sunday afternoon: “Shaver Lake Marina surrounded in flames. Our @ABC30 crew has been told we cannot exit the marina parking lot.” An hour later, she was escorted out by a Cal Fire crew, with flames burning beside the highway.

Similar harrowing tales emerged from Mammoth Pool Reservoir on Saturday.

“We saw the fire get to the lake and start pushing toward our side,” Hernandez recalled, the whites of his eyes red from smoke as he paced around the Fresno Convention and Entertainment Center, a COVID-19 backup medical facility turned into a Creek Fire evacuation site. “It was spreading so fast. We just got caught up in it. It kind of felt like a movie, but at the same time, I was visualizing everything around me. It was so intense.”

Hernandez was plucked from the lake on the last helicopter ride.

Jon Miller, a former Army National Guard helicopter aviator out of the same Stockton base as the Chinook CH-47 crew, said flying in those conditions, with the wind and fire and darkness, is “extremely hazardous.”

“That’s a very high-risk mission,” Miller said. “This was an extraordinary thing that those people did.”

Jerber and Ana Maradiaga were camping at the reservoir with their son and nephew Evan Rivas, of Los Altos. They heard of the fire Saturday, packed up their car, and tried to escape along the one road out. The traffic was stopped, as Pogue said trees toppled.

They parked in the dirt lot near the water, along with other campers, and braced. Someone from a neighboring car lent them masks and blankets soaked with lake water. As the fire raced by, they watched in horror, wrapped in the wet blankets.

“The kids were panicking,” Ana Maradiaga said.

“We thought we were going to die,” her husband, Jerber, said as they stood outside the Fresno convention center.

Evan’s father, Henry, drove Sunday to pick the family up. As a Chronicle reporter spoke to the Maradiagas, Henry sprinted to his son and the pair embraced.

“I talked to my son and asked about the fun parts of the camping and the helicopter ride,” Henry said. “I wanted him to focus on the positives, instead of reflecting on the horror.”

Sonia Portillo was on a camping trip with more than 10 family members, and once they heard the fire had jumped the San Joaquin River, they packed up and left. She was able to drive out of the reservoir with her boyfriend and stepsons, but the rest of her family had to get evacuated by helicopter.

“I was just so worried that they weren’t going to get out of there,” Portillo said. “I don’t know what I would do without my mom.”

At that moment, she spotted her mother walking out of the convention center and raced to give her a hug — “It’s all OK!”

By Sunday, the Creek Fire continued its march northward. Yosemite National Park issued a fire advisory south of Chinquapin, including Wawona, which warned residents of a possible evacuation.

Meteorologists and fire experts marveled at the satellite images and photographs of the wildfire.

“Yet more severe pyroconvective activity on the #CreekFire plume today. Lightning continues to be observed periodically, as well as strong localized rotation that could give rise to ‘pyrotornados.’ The extreme behavior on this fire is ... something else,” UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain said on Twitter.

Sheriff Pogue said they’ve prepared for a fire in the area for years, removing dead trees along roadways and critical infrastructure, digging in firebreaks, but the Creek Fire threw everything out the window.

“I’ve lived in the area for more than 40 years,” he said. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

California simmers while it burns, but no big power outages

By Marcio Jose Sanchez and Christopher Weber, Associated Press
Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Sept. 6, 2020

SHAVER LAKE, Calif. (AP) — Rescuers in military helicopters airlifted 207 people to safety after an explosive wildfire trapped them in a popular camping area in California’s Sierra National Forest, one of dozens of fires burning Sunday amid record-breaking temperatures that strained the state’s electrical grid and for a time threatened power outages for millions.

The California Office of Emergency Services said Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters were used for the rescues that began late Saturday and continued into Sunday morning at Mammoth Pool Reservoir. At least two people were severely injured and 10 more suffered moderate injuries. Two campers refused rescue and stayed behind, the Madera County Sheriff’s Office said, and there was no immediate word on their fates.

A photo tweeted by the California National Guard showed more than 20 evacuees packed tightly inside one helicopter, some crouched on the floor clutching their belongings. In another photo taken on the ground from a helicopter cockpit, the densely wooded hills surrounding the aircraft were in flames.

The blaze dubbed the Creek Fire has charred more than 71 square miles (184 square kilometers) of timber, and the 800 firefighters on the scene had yet to get any containment after two days of work on steep terrain in sweltering heat. Some homes and businesses have burned, but there was no official tabulation yet.

Other blazes broke out in Southern California and forced evacuations in San Diego and San Bernardino counties. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, said the latter blaze, called the El Dorado Fire, started Saturday morning and was caused by a smoke-generating pyrotechnic device, used during a gender-reveal party.

The Creek Fire churned southward from the reservoir through miles of dense forest and by Sunday afternoon threatened a marina and cabins along Shaver Lake, where Jack Machado helped friends remove propane tanks from the lodge Cottages at the Point. Sheriff’s deputies went through the town of several hundred residents to make sure people complied with evacuation orders.

“The lake is totally engulfed with smoke. You can’t hardly see in front of you,” Machado said. “The sky’s turning red. It looks like Mars out there.”

Temperatures in the fire zone were in the 90s, but that was cool compared to many parts of the state. Downtown Los Angeles reached 111 degrees (44 Celsius). and a record-shattering high of 121 degrees (49.4 Celsius) was recorded in the nearby Woodland Hills neighborhood of the San Fernando Valley.

It was the highest temperature ever recorded in Los Angeles County, according to the National Weather Service. The mark rivaled the high in California’s Death Valley, typically the hottest place in the country.

Meanwhile, downtown San Francisco set a record for the day with a high of 100 (37.7 Celsius), smashing the previous mark by 5 degrees.

“By our calculations, over 99% of California’s population is under an Excessive Heat Warning or Heat Advisory today,” the weather service in Sacramento tweeted Sunday afternoon.

The exceptionally hot temperatures were driving the highest power use of the year, and transmission losses because of the wildfires have cut into supplies. Eric Schmitt of the California Independent System

Operator that manages the state's power grid said up to 3 million customers faced power outages if residents didn't curtail their electricity usage.

About 7 p.m., the California Independent System Operator declared an emergency and said power outages were imminent because a transmission line carrying power from Oregon to California and another in-state power plant went offline unexpectedly. The cause of the outages is unknown at this time, the agency said.

But about 8:30 p.m., the agency issued a tweet calling off the emergency "thanks to conservation of Californians!" It said no power outages were ordered by operators of the grid.

Pacific Gas & Electric, the state's largest utility, warned customers that it might cut power starting Tuesday because of expected high winds and heat that could create even greater fire danger. Some of the state's largest and deadliest fires in recent years have been sparked by downed power lines and other utility equipment.

The Creek Fire started Friday and by Saturday afternoon exploded in size, jumped the San Joaquin River and cut off the only road into the Mammoth Pool Campground, national forest spokesman Dan Tune said. At least 2,000 structures were threatened in the area about 290 miles (467 kilometers) north of Los Angeles. The cause of the fire hasn't been determined.

While some campers were rescued by helicopters, others made a white-knuckle drive to safety. Juliana Park recorded video of flames on both sides of her car as she and others fled down a mountain road.

"A backpacking trip cut short by unforeseen thunder, ash rain, and having to drive through literal fire to evacuate #SierraNationalForest in time," Park tweeted. "Grateful to the SNF ranger who led us down ... wish we got her name."

The Mammoth Pool Reservoir is about 35 miles (56 kilometers) northeast of Fresno. It's surrounded by thick pine forests and is a popular destination for boating and fishing. Bone-dry conditions and the hot weather fueled the flames once the fire started, and it grew rapidly.

Lindsey Abbott and her family were guided to safety by a stranger they followed down from their campsite near Whisky Falls.

"It was so hot, you could feel the flames going through the window," she told ABC30 in Fresno.

Ashley Wagner was among those rescued, along with two relatives and a friend. They were trapped in Logan's Meadow behind Wagner's Store, a 63-year-old business run by her aunt that was destroyed.

"My family's history just went up in flames," Wagner told the station.

In Southern California, crews scrambled to douse several fires that popped up, including one that closed mountain roads in Angeles National Forest. The largest was a blaze in the foothills of Yucaipa east of Los Angeles that prompted evacuation orders for eastern portions of the city of 54,000 along with several mountain communities. Cal Fire said the fire scorched at least 4.7 square miles (12.2 square kilometers) of brush and trees.

In eastern San Diego County, the Valley Fire broke out Saturday afternoon, and fire officials warned the blaze was burning at a "dangerous rate of speed." By Sunday morning it had destroyed at least 10 structures after burning 6.25 square miles (16 square kilometers) and prompting evacuations near the remote community of Alpine in the Cleveland National Forest. At least two of the lost structures were homes, ABC10 News in San Diego reported.

Cal Fire said 14,800 firefighters were battling 23 major fires in the state. California has seen 900 wildfires since Aug. 15, many of them started by an intense series of thousands of lightning strikes. The blazes have burned more than 1.5 million acres (2,343 square miles). There have been eight fire deaths and nearly 3,300 structures destroyed.

Taking in the Damage

By Katie Evans, Staff Reporter

Press Banner, Friday, Sept. 4, 2020

Late August 18th, I finished my latest article, "A Perfect Storm for Fire." Throughout that Tuesday, I gained more motivation for the piece, as smoke gradually obscured our valley from my window. At the time, the fires throughout the county seemed manageable. Robert Gray, the Felton Fire Protection District Chief assured, "We've sent assistance to neighboring agencies, but in Felton we've had no fires. We've just chased a few fallen trees and power lines." However, concern for air quality soon paled in comparison with the Tuesday night evacuations of all Boulder Creek residents. Countless other neighborhoods soon followed.

Before this, I didn't think 2% containment wouldn't be a cause for joy. However, after four days of 0% containment, many breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing the announcement from CAL FIRE. 20 days after the lightning strikes began this fire complex, it's now stable enough for accurate statistical analysis by CAL FIRE. While statistics will never truly capture the pain of losing one's home, the work ethic of a firefighter, or the relief felt for a loved one's safety, let's delve into the numbers behind this natural disaster and the people who have worked so hard to fight against it.

At this point, 85,467 acres have burned in Santa Cruz and San Mateo Counties in the 20 days since the fire began.

We've reached almost 50% containment with the help of:

- 12 helicopters
- 209 fire engines
- 10 bull dozers
- 32 water tenders
- and 54 crews made up of 2,431 extraordinarily brave men and women.

More than 900 homes have been lost in the fire, almost 400 "minor structures," and about 170 businesses. Almost 100 homes and less than 20 businesses have been damaged from the fires, but so countless buildings have been saved by the hard work of our fire departments.

Over 60,000 individuals were evacuated over the course of the fire and many still cannot return home. However, repopulation efforts began on August 26th. So far, UCSC, Scotts Valley, Zayante, Mount Hermon, Felton, and Ben Lomond have returned home.

For those zones still evacuated, the process to return appears long and arduous. According to CAL FIRE, "Many known and unknown hazards exist following an intense fire. This includes fire weakened or dead trees that can fall without warning, burned out stumps creating holes under trails and damage to parking areas and roads." The Third District Supervisor, Ryan Coonerty, summed up the repopulation efforts in highly impacted areas, "CAL FIRE and the County will need to assess all the roadways, the trees along the roadway and hillsides. Power and water will need to be restored. Each housing site will need to be inspected. In addition, the state will clean up toxic materials and then the state/county would contract, if homeowners agree, to do debris removal. This process can take months. It is at this point that access will be allowed."

Water is another serious concern for returning evacuees. The San Lorenzo Valley Water District (SLVWD) has faced difficulty in maintaining their water supplies and providing fire fighters with vast amounts of water. The Water District Director, Rick Rogers, reported a loss of 4.5 million gallons due to fire damage. On top of the water loss, many homes don't have safe, potable water. A few high-density polyethylene water mainlines were destroyed by the fire, "causing widespread depressurization," that can "introduce contaminants into the system." Brookdale and areas north from the intersection of Highway 9 and Alba Road are potentially affected by this contamination and should not drink water from their homes. However, most homeowners should have access to water upon returning after evacuation, but the District suggests, "flushing your home's front hose bib by running an outside faucet for about 5 minutes upon returning back home from evacuation."

The Fifth District Supervisor Bruce McPherson also spoke to CAL FIRE and had much advice for returning evacuees:

- When driving, watch for trees, brush and rocks that are weakened or loosened. Be aware of debris or damage on roads and driveways. Traffic may be delayed or lanes reduced due to repair and firefighter operations.
- Use extreme caution around trees, power poles and other tall objects or structures that may have been weakened. Be aware that trees with deep charring are weakened. Smoldering holes in the ground can be full of hot coals and white ash.
- Before inspecting your home, check for the smell of gas. Use a battery-powered flashlight to inspect a damaged home. Check for hot embers in rain gutters, on the roof, under overhangs, under decks, crawl spaces and attics. Be sure your wood and debris piles are not hiding any embers.
- If electricity is off, before turning it on, make sure all appliances are turned off. If the electric meter has visible damage, do not turn the breakers on. If there are electrical wires on the ground, stay clear.
- Do not drink water from the faucet until officials say it is safe.
- Discard food that has been exposed to heat, smoke, flood waters or soot. Refrigerated items are also spoiled and need to be discarded.
- If you have a propane tank or natural gas, heating oil tank system, or solar electrical system, do not use them before proper inspection by a licensed technician

For the folks lucky enough to return to our beautiful community, welcome back. For the folks still waiting to return home, we hope to see you soon. For those who have lost their homes, we are so sorry for your loss, but so glad you are safe.

Here are a few vital resources for our community:

- For more updates on the CZU Lightning Fire Complex, check out the CAL FIRE Twitter at <https://twitter.com/CALFIRECZU>.
- For a map of evacuated zones, visit <https://tinyurl.com/y3zc8hpt>.
- For a map of structures damaged in the fire, see <https://www.santacruzcounty.us/FireRecovery/DamageAssessmentMap.aspx>.
- For evacuees that need help finding a place to stay, you can call the County Hotel Hotline, 831-454-2181.