

Creek Fire live updates: Fresno Pacific getaway cabin destroyed; 244,756 acres burned

By Joshua Tehee

Modesto Bee, Fresno Bee and other papers, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020

The nearly two-week-old Creek Fire has burned 244,756 acres and was 18% contained as of Thursday morning.

Full containment of the wildfire in the Sierra National Forest and foothill communities of Shaver Lake, Huntington Lake and North Fork isn't expected until October.

- The Bullfrog Fire continues to burn on the eastern fringe of the Dinkey Lakes Wilderness west of Courtright Reservoir. At last update, it had burned 900 acres since it started Sept. 9 and ,had zero containment.
- The Sequoia Complex Fire, which has been burning in the Golden Trout Wilderness Area of Sequoia National Forest since Aug. 19, had burned 122,835 acres as of Thursday morning. It remains at 12% containment.

Tulare County will be doing structure damage assessments when it is safe to access areas impacted by the fire. Homeowners will be contacted directly once these assessments are completed, but need to register with the county online.

Among the structures destroyed by the Creek Fire was the Casa Pacifica near Shaver Lake.

The three-floor, 3,600-square-foot cabin was owned by Fresno Pacific University, built by faculty in the early 1980s and used primarily as a weekend retreat facility during the academic year and more fully in the summer. The cabin was also popular with non-school groups and scheduling was reserved up to three years in advance.

The cabin burned during the first weekend of the fire.

"Casa held a special place in the hearts of the FPU community, including countless alumni," Fresno Pacific President Dr. Joseph Jones said in a history of the cabin written on the university's news site.

8 a.m.: Air quality improves in northern Valley counties

The weather forecast remains much as it has for the week: thick smoke over most of the central Valley region.

The National Weather Service is predicting increasing clouds over the region Thursday and Friday, due to mid- and high-level moisture associated with tropical storm Karina. A weak trough is expected through the area Thursday night, bringing more wind in the higher elevations, but "the stubborn smoke and haze will continue."

There is the possibility of light showers or sprinkles in the Sierra with the trough passing, but this system is not expected over area wildfires.

The air quality index remains unhealthy for the majority of the area, though the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is forecasting improvement in some north Valley counties. San Joaquin and Stanislaus County are expected to have moderate air quality on Thursday.

The quality in Fresno is improved, if only slightly. As of 7 a.m., the PM 2.5 particulate level had dipped to its lowest level since Sunday. Still, sensitive individuals should exercise indoors and everyone should avoid prolonged or vigorous outdoor activities.

Cal Fire SCU closing in on 100% containment

By Erick Torres

Patterson Irrigator, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020

Cal Fire Santa Clara Unit reports state that officials expect full containment of the SCU Lightning Complex Fire by Thursday, Sept. 19. Reports on Monday reflected 98% containment totaling 396,624 acres of damage since the blazes began due to lightning strikes on Aug. 16.

This ranks the wildfire as the third-largest in California history according to data released by Cal Fire.

It ranks behind the August Complex Fire that hit Tehama County in the Elk Creek and Stonyford area of the Mendocino National Forest that began on Aug. 17 and is still spreading. The August Complex Fire is already the largest in state history, with 788,880 acres burned, yet it is only 30% contained as of Sept. 14. One fatality has been associated with the August Complex Fire.

The second-largest fire in California history occurred in July of 2018 during the Mendocino Complex Fire that destroyed 459,123 acres of land and 280 structures with one death.

This has been a historic year for wildfires in the Golden State. Three of the top five largest wildfires in recorded history have occurred in the last month. Five of the top 20 overall have since August.

A total of approximately 16,500 firefighters are working to contain 28 major wildfires currently burning across California. The fires have collectively burned over 3.2 million acres since the beginning of the year, which equals an area larger than the state of Connecticut, according to Cal Fire reports.

Over 24 fatalities have been associated with the fires, with over 4,200 structures destroyed in the state since Aug. 15.

Elevated fire weather conditions are expected in portions of Central and Southern California due to very warm and dry conditions, and smokey conditions will persist in much of the valley areas throughout the state leading to poor air quality conditions for millions of California residents.

Patterson had an unhealthy air quality rating of 181 AQI, according to airnow.gov, on Monday. Residents with heart or lung disease, older adults, children and teens are advised to avoid strenuous outdoor activities and consider moving physical activities indoors or rescheduling them.

Healthy residents should choose less strenuous activities and shorten the amount of time they are active outdoors and wait for better air quality before resuming activities.

‘Nothing left in the bucket’: Wildfire resources run thin

By James Anderson and Matthew Brown, Associated Press
The Business Journal, Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2020

Justin Silvera came off the fire lines in Northern California after a grueling 36 straight days battling wildfires and evacuating residents ahead of the flames. Before that, he and his crew had worked for 20 days, followed by a three-day break.

Silvera, a 43-year-old battalion chief with Cal Fire, California’s state firefighting agency, said he’s lost track of the blazes he’s fought this year. He and his crew have sometimes been on duty for 64 hours at a stretch, their only rest coming in 20-minute catnaps.

“I’ve been at this 23 years, and by far this is the worst I’ve seen,” Silvera said before bunking down at a motel for 24 hours. After working in Santa Cruz County, his next assignment was to head north to attack wildfires near the Oregon border.

His exhaustion reflects the situation up and down the West Coast fire lines: This year’s blazes have taxed the human, mechanical and financial resources of the nation’s wildfire-fighting forces to an extraordinary degree. And half of the fire season is yet to come.

Heat, drought and a strategic decision to attack the flames early combined with the coronavirus to put a historically heavy burden on fire teams.

“There’s never enough resources,” said Silvera, one of nearly 17,000 firefighters in California. “Typically with Cal Fire we’re able to attack — air tankers, choppers, dozers. We’re good at doing that. But these conditions in the field, the drought, the wind, this stuff is just taking off. We can’t contain one before another erupts.”

Washington State Forester George Geissler says there are hundreds of unfulfilled requests for help throughout the West. Agencies are constantly seeking firefighters, aircraft, engines and support personnel.

Fire crews have been summoned from at least nine states and other countries, including Canada and Israel. Hundreds of agreements for agencies to offer mutual assistance have been maxed out at the federal, state and local levels, he said.

“We know that there’s really nothing left in the bucket,” Geissler said. “Our sister agencies to the south in California and Oregon are really struggling.”

Demand for firefighting resources has been high since mid-August, when fire officials bumped the national preparedness level to critical, meaning at least 80% of crews were already committed to fighting fires, and there were few personnel and little equipment to spare.

Because of the extreme fire behavior, “you can’t say for sure having more resources would make a difference,” said Carrie Bilbao, a spokesperson for the National Interagency Fire Center. Officials at the U.S. government operation in Boise, Idaho, help decide which fires get priority nationwide when equipment and firefighters run scarce.

Andy Stahl, a forester who runs Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, an advocacy group in Oregon, said it would have been impossible to stop some of the most destructive blazes, a task he compared to “dropping a bucket of water on an atomic bomb.”

But Stahl contends the damage could have been less if government agencies were not so keen to put out every blaze. By stamping out smaller fires and those that ignite during wetter months, Stahl said officials have allowed fuel to build up, setting the stage for bigger fires during times of drought and hot, windy weather.

That’s been exacerbated this year by the coronavirus pandemic, which prompted U.S. Forest Service Chief Vickie Christiansen to issue a directive in June to fight all fires aggressively, reversing a decades-long trend of allowing some to burn. The idea was to minimize large concentrations of firefighters by extinguishing blazes quickly.

Fighting the flames from the air was key to the strategy, with 35 air tankers and 200 helicopters being used, Forest Service spokesperson Kaari Carpenter said.

Yet by Aug. 30, following the deaths of some firefighters, including four aviators, and several close calls, fire officials in Boise warned that long-term fatigue was setting in. They called for a “tactical pause,” so fire commanders could reinforce safe practices.

Tim Ingalsbee, a member of the advocacy group Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics and Ecology, said the June directive from Christiansen returned the forest service to a mindset prevalent for much of the last century that focused on putting out fires as quickly as possible. He said allowing more fires to burn when they are not threatening life or property would free up firefighters for the most dangerous blazes.

With no end in sight to the pandemic, Ingalsbee worried the focus on aggressively attacking every fire could prove lasting.

“More crews, more air tankers, more engines and dozers still can’t overcome this powerful force of nature,” he said. “The crews are beat up and fatigued and spread thin, and we’re barely halfway through the traditional fire season.”

Cal Fire’s roughly 8,000 personnel have been fighting blazes from the Oregon border to the Mexico border, repeatedly bouncing from blaze to blaze, said Tim Edwards, president of the union for Cal Fire, the nation’s second largest firefighting agency.

“We’re battle-hardened, but it seems year after year, it gets tougher, and at some point in time we won’t be able to cope. We’ll reach a breaking point,” said Edwards, a 25-year veteran.

The immediate dangers of the fires are compounded by worries about COVID-19 in camp and at home.

Firefighters “see all this destruction and the fatigue, and then they’re getting those calls from home, where their families are dealing with school and child care because of COVID. It’s stressing them out, and we have to keep their heads in the game,” he said.

The pandemic also has limited the state's use of inmate fire crews — either because of early inmate releases to prevent outbreaks in prisons or because many are under quarantine in those prisons, both Berland and Geissler said.

Aside from the human toll, the conflagrations in Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and now California and the Pacific Northwest have cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

California alone has spent \$529 million since July 1 on wildfires, said Daniel Berlant, assistant deputy director of Cal Fire. By comparison, the state spent \$691 million the entire fiscal year that ended June 30. The U.S. government will reimburse most state costs for the biggest disasters.

Back in the field, Silvera and his crew saved two people at the beginning of their 26-day duty tour. The two hikers encountered the crew after the firefighters themselves were briefly trapped while trying to save the headquarters building at Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

“We got in a bad spot, and there were a few hours there we didn't know if we'd make it,” Silvera said. “Those people found us, and we wouldn't have been in there.”

“That's what you sign up for.”

Air district seeks Kern County representative for environmental justice

The Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2020

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is taking applications to fill an open seat on its Environmental Justice Advisory Group for the role of a Kern County at-large representative.

Applicants need to be a resident of Kern County in the San Joaquin Valley, have experience in air quality issues and an interest in representing ethnic and/or low-income communities. Find more information at valleyair.org/ejag.

Submit an application to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 1990 E. Gettysburg, Fresno, CA 93726 or email michelle.franco@valleyair.org by Sept. 30. Call 392-5500 for more information.

Poor air quality means free GET rides Thursday

The Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2020

The poor air quality forecast for Thursday means Golden Empire Transit District will continue to provide free rides on its fixed routes and GET-A-Lift all day.

The air quality index is 156. GET provides free rides with an AQI over 151.

Western wildfire smoke causes East Coast haze, vivid sunsets

By Susan Montoya Bryan, Associated Press

Modesto Bee, Fresno Bee and other papers, Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2020

As the red sun colored by Western wildfires rises, a bird joins another on top of a light post near Walla Walla Community College in Walla Walla, Wash., Wednesday, Sept. 16, 2020. Greg Lehman AP

The smoke from dozens of wildfires in the western United States is stretching clear across the country — and even pushing into Mexico, Canada and Europe. While the dangerous plumes are forcing people inside along the West Coast, residents thousands of miles away in the East are seeing unusually hazy skies and remarkable sunsets.

The wildfires racing across tinder-dry landscape in California, Idaho, Oregon and Washington are extraordinary, but the long reach of their smoke isn't unprecedented. While there are only small pockets in the southeastern U.S. that are haze free, experts say the smoke poses less of a health concern for those who are farther away.

The sun was transformed into a perfect orange orb as it set over New York City on Tuesday. Photographs of it sinking behind the skyline and glinting through tree leaves flooded social media. On Wednesday, New Jersey residents described a yellow tinge to the overcast skies, and weather forecasters were kept busy explaining the phenomenon and making predictions as to how long the conditions would last.

On the opposite coast, air quality conditions were among some of the worst ever recorded. Smoke cloaked the Golden Gate Bridge and left Portland and Seattle in an ashy fog, as crews have exhausted themselves trying to keep the flames from consuming more homes and even wider swaths of forest.

Satellite images showed that smoke from the wildfires has traveled almost 5,000 miles (8,000 kilometers) to Britain and other parts of northern Europe, scientists said Wednesday.

of the atmosphere, is to blame for the reach of the smoke, experts explained.

“We always seem, at times, to get the right combination of enough smoke and the upper level jet stream to line up to bring that across the country, so we’re just seeing this again,” said Matt Solum with the National Weather Service’s regional operations center in Salt Lake City, Utah. “It’s definitely not the first time this has happened.”

There could be some easing of the haze this weekend as a storm system is expected to move into the Pacific Northwest and could affect the conditions that helped the smoke travel across the country. But Solum said there’s always a chance for more smoke and haze to shift around.

“Just due to all the wildfires that are going on, this is likely going to continue for a while,” he said. “You might have ebbs and flows of that smoke just depending on how the upper level winds set up.”

Kim Knowlton, a senior scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council in New York City, said she woke up Wednesday to a red sunrise and more haze.

She said millions of people who live beyond the flames can end up dealing with diminished air quality as it’s not uncommon for wildfire smoke to travel hundreds of miles.

Although the health impacts are reduced the farther and higher into the atmosphere the smoke travels, Knowlton and her colleagues said the resulting haze can exacerbate existing problems like asthma and add to ozone pollution.

Air quality remains unhealthy for Central Valley today as wildfire smoke looms Health experts say you should stay inside as much as you can

ABC30, Tuesday, September 15, 2020

FRESNO, Calif. (KFSN) -- Another day of unhealthy air quality is ahead for the entire Central Valley on Tuesday as smoke from California wildfires continues to loom in the air.

ABC30 Meteorologist Madeline Evans said Fresno and Madera counties will have a very unhealthy air quality index rating, while the rest of the Valley is expected to be unhealthy.

Many are waking up to thick smoke across the area, and visibility is three miles or less.

Winds will shift from the southwest and potentially help push some of the wildfire smoke out by midweek, making for a small improvement in the air quality, Evans said.

Health experts say you should stay inside as much as you can and recommended changing your air filters more often to improve the air quality inside your home.

You can track the air quality in your region by clicking here.

Wildfire Smoke Billows Into Valley ‘No Matter Which Way The Wind Is Blowing’

By Kerry Klein

Valley Public Radio, Monday, September 14, 2020

So far in 2020, thousands of wildfires have torched a record-setting 3.2 million acres in California. If that makes this wildfire season unprecedented, here and throughout the West Coast, so is our region’s resulting smog. In a press conference on Monday, Valley air officials said: Don’t expect the air to clear for at least a few more days, and possibly longer.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency’s AirNow tool, air quality on Monday afternoon varied from unhealthy in the southern Valley to hazardous in the north—a range in the Air Quality Index (AQI)

from roughly 150 to 300—as a direct result of the acrid smoke that’s been blowing into the Valley by wildfires for weeks.

Jonathan Klassen, director of Air Quality Science and Planning with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said this stretch of bad air has been historic, even in an air basin that routinely ranks among the most polluted in the country. “I don’t think we’ve had a widespread event with this many high concentrations for this prolonged of a period,” he said. “I think we are breaking some records here for air quality in a bad way.”

Klassen shared a map of where fires are currently burning up and down the state’s mountain ranges, then showed a satellite animation of the smoke billowing out of them. “The challenge we’ve been having is no matter which way the wind is blowing, smoke continues to come into the San Joaquin Valley,” he said. “That smoke really gets trapped near the valley floor and we have very high concentrations.”

The most harmful component of the smoke is particulate matter, made up of particles that, once inhaled, are tiny enough to then enter the bloodstream. That means particulate matter doesn’t just exacerbate respiratory ailments like asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, but can have impacts far beyond the lungs.

“It can aggravate cardiovascular disease, it can increase your risk for heart attack or stroke, it’s been tied to dementia,” said air district representative Jaime Holt, especially in children, the elderly, and those with other health conditions.

The air district is strongly urging people to remain inside, and to use air purifiers or home-made air filters if central air is unavailable.

Outdoors, cloth or surgical masks may be better than nothing, but the best protection comes from N95 masks. However, “we aren’t specifically recommending that everyone go out and get an N95 mask, because there aren’t enough for everyone,” said Holt. “We need to really make sure that those N95 masks are being used by essential workers.”

The state Division of Occupational Safety and Health requires employers to provide N95 or similar masks to employees working outside when the AQI exceeds 151, which has happened many times recently on many parts of the West Coast.