

SQF Complex update: Winter's first storm blesses firefighters

By Joshua Yeager

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Firefighters across the Sierra Nevada benefitted from a winter storm that delivered up to a foot of snow over the weekend after months of scorching heat and virtually no rain.

The wet season's first significant storm aided efforts to contain the SQF Complex and Creek fires, which have together burned more than half a million acres of forest land across Tulare, Fresno and Madera counties.

Both incidents are expected to be fully contained by the end of next week as temperatures plummet, slowing fire growth to a crawl and reducing staffing needs. More than 130 firefighters on the Creek Fire were sent home over the weekend.

"The likelihood of any (fire) movement is very, very limited," Creek Fire Behavior Analyst Byron Kimball said.

Fire managers initially feared that gusty winds could whip up embers and fire activity before the snow and rain hit; a fear that so far appears unfounded, according to officials. Firefighters won't be able to assess the storm's full impact until the weather permits reconnaissance pilots to safely return to the air.

"The moisture from this cold system is just enough to slow fire behavior and fire spread in lighter fuels, with dry, larger fuels continuing to burn where protected from the moisture," Incident Commander Mike Wakoski said in his daily SQF Complex report. "Current fire behavior is expected to be minimal in the uncontained fire's edge to the north and northeast."

SQF Complex strategy shifts

Crews on the SQF Complex have shifted to "patrol and monitor" status due to inclement weather that is expected to dip to lows of 11 degrees at higher elevations. The night shift has also been temporarily halted.

Recovery and cleanup efforts will continue as weather permits, mostly along the southeast corner of the fire perimeter, at lower elevations, officials said.

Helicopters are expected to resume flying on Tuesday, Wakoski said. Some smoke has been spotted within fire lines.

Air crews will also determine whether it is safe for firefighters on the ground to return to the backcountry to finish removing protective wrap from ranger cabins and other remote structures.

Camps on the east side of the fire have been dismantled and moved to the west to help prevent landslides — a threat brought on by snowfall. Wildfire erosion leaves downslope communities such as Camp Nelson particularly vulnerable to landslides following heavy rain and snow.

More updates on cleanup, weather

Beginning Monday, victims of the SQF Complex can apply for cleanup assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. County, state and federal agencies will remove debris at no cost to property owners.

The rebuilding of cabins and structures cannot begin until all hazardous waste and debris have been removed.

Snow is expected to return to the High Sierra on Thursday. The National Weather Service has issued a frost advisory across much of the central and southern San Joaquin Valley overnight Monday and Tuesday.

The lightning-caused Castle and Shotgun fires were discovered on Aug. 19 in the Giant Sequoia National Monument and later managed as one incident, the SQF Complex. Tulare County's most destructive wildfire has scorched 171,000 acres and is 80% contained.

The Creek Fire is the fourth-largest fire incident in California history and the largest single fire to burn in the Golden State. The fire exploded in the Sierra National Forest over Labor Day weekend. It has since burned roughly 380,000 acres, destroyed homes and is 70% contained as of Monday.

Its cause remains under investigation.