

Ferguson Fire layers Yosemite Valley with smoke, as 108 structures remain vulnerable

By William Ramirez

Sierra Star, Monday, July 16, 2018

The Ferguson Fire burning west of Yosemite National Park in the Merced River Canyon has grown to more than 9,000 acres, wildfire managers reported Monday morning.

Fighting rugged terrain and a dense carpet of smoke, fire crews continued their battle Monday against the rapidly expanding Ferguson Fire, which more than doubled in size in less than 24 hours.

The fire, sparked Friday evening west of El Portal in Mariposa County, had increased to 9,266 acres by Monday, up from Sunday's estimate of around 4,000 acres.

The estimated containment remained at 2 percent as of Monday afternoon, with 108 structures threatened.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation, said National Park Service spokeswoman Shanelle Saunders.

"Crews are working up the east flank. They are trying to put in contingency lines, and that's because in a lot of areas they can't go direct on the fire due to the rugged, inaccessible terrain," Saunders said.

Nearby Yosemite National Park remains open to visitors, despite the fire and a thick layer of smoke. Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman said visitors need to be aware of the decreased visibility and air quality. "We're just advising people with respiratory issues to be careful due to the air quality," he said.

Gediman said the park is letting the visitors decide whether the conditions are bearable. The park thus far has no official figures on whether the fire has driven away people, but Gediman said it was "less busy" than usual Monday.

"We're just trying to do our best to get information out and about, like where to go and what to do," he said. Although Yosemite was completely clouded with smoke, with visibility of less than 100 feet in some places, it wasn't enough to keep some visitors away.

Norah Guzman and her husband John Guzman of San Diego were out enjoying a picnic with their two children Monday. "I wanted it to be this grand moment where we drove through the tunnel and saw everything, but we couldn't really see very well," Norah said.

Visitor John Reyes of San Francisco compared the smoke to Bay Area fog. "On a regular clear day, you could see the view and it's beautiful," Reyes said, pointing at the mountains. "Right now what do you see? You can barely see it unless you've got some good lenses."

Still, Reyes said he felt safe with the firefighters addressing the situation.

Alison Peterson of San Diego said the air in Yosemite was hard to breathe Monday. She and her family had been staying at Cedar Lodge in El Portal, which was given an evacuation notice due to the fire. "We're a little nervous about that," she said.

At around 9 p.m. Monday a mandatory evacuation was issued for Incline Road from Clearing House to the Foresta Bridge.

A new evacuation advisory was issued Monday morning for the areas of Ponderosa Basin, Lushmeadows, Triangle Road from Jerseydale Road to Highway 49 south and all side roads, Darrah Road from Triangle to Sherrod Road, and the east side of Highway 49 south from Darrah Road to Harris Cutoff Road — which includes Boyer Road, Woodland Area, Wass Road and Tip Top Road, according to the InciWeb website.

Mandatory evacuations were already in effect for Clearing House, Mariposa Pines, Cedar Lodge, Savage Trading Post, and the Jerseydale area, according to Cal Fire spokesperson Natasha Fouts-Noble. She said 332 firefighters are assigned to the blaze.

"We have a lot of resources coming onto scene, and the steep terrain, access to the fire and the smoke conditions are all challenges that we're facing," Fouts-Noble said.

The fire on Saturday claimed the life of firefighter Braden Varney, who was killed when the bulldozer he was driving rolled over. A GoFundMe account established to help his family had already raised nearly \$29,000 (of a \$30,000 goal) in one day, with 211 pledges.

Cal Fire officials on Monday said they had recovered Varney's body from the crash site. A vehicle procession on Monday left the intersection of Highway 49 South and Darrah Road, carrying Varney's body to the Stanislaus County Coroner's Office.