

Growing Northern California fires straining resources as Newsom calls for help

By Dominic Fracassa, Alexei Koseff and Dustin Gardiner
San Francisco Chronicle, Friday, August 21, 2020

Friday brought another day of intense firefighting across Northern California, as clusters of lightning-sparked conflagrations continue their deadly march across the region.

The fires so far have killed at least four people, displaced thousands — possibly for weeks rather than days — destroyed homes and torched precious redwood forests with little sign of reprieve in sight.

The SCU Lightning Complex fire, comprised of some 20 conflagrations in Santa Clara County, Alameda County, Contra Costa County, San Joaquin County and Stanislaus counties became the largest blaze in the state after it exploded to cover just under 230,000 acres as of Friday afternoon. Firefighters have so far placed containment barriers around just 10% of the fire, which is now the seventh largest on record in the state.

The LNU Lightning Complex fire in Napa, Sonoma, Lake, Yolo and Solano counties grew more modestly overnight, standing at just over 219,000 acres Friday afternoon and with 7% containment.

Firefighters have still not been able to eke out any containment against the 50,000-acre CZU August Lightning Complex in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties, which was bearing down menacingly on the already evacuated UC Santa Cruz campus.

Law enforcement and fire officials have evacuated 64,600 residents between the two counties. Chris Clark, chief deputy of the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office, warned those fleeing the fires that it could be weeks before they can return to their homes due to the unpredictable nature of the blazes.

More than 560 fires are burning across California, scorching some 771,000 acres, or just over 1,200 square miles so far, state officials said. They were sparked by a barrage of nearly 12,000 lightning strikes, most of which hit the state last weekend. More lightning could be on the way in coming days: The National Weather Service said Friday that atmospheric conditions could produce dry lightning between Sunday morning and next Tuesday.

With firefighting resources stretched to the breaking point, Gov. Gavin Newsom has called for aide from across the country. Ten states have contributed or pledged assistance to California's firefighting efforts, Newsom said Friday. He has also requested help from Australia and Canada.

"Fire conditions have increased in other states, and as a consequence of that, our mutual aid that goes outside of the state of California has also been stretched. But that mutual aid system nonetheless has been activated," Newsom said.

"Those states are also dealing with their own domestic challenges within their states related to the heat wave, and yet they're still offering support. We have more people, but it's not enough. We have more air support, but it's still not enough," he added.

The dual crises of the fires and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has prompted evacuation centers to take additional precautions.

Dozens of evacuees remained huddled Friday morning at a Red Cross shelter at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds. They slept spaced six-feet apart on cots in a large exhibit hall where volunteers brought meals to them. Blue tape on the floor reminded everyone to keep social distancing.

Outside the shelter, the smoke-filled skies felt like déjà vu for Mark Struthers, 47, who lost his Santa Rosa home in the 2017 Tubbs fire.

He's been homeless for the last three years, and had been camping along the river in Guerneville before he was evacuated Tuesday. This time, he said, the fires helped him find shelter.

"In a weird way, this is kind of a blessing for me," Struthers said. "It feels nice to be here and have a safe, secure place."

He said he's been trying to put his life back together since the Tubbs Fire caused him to start drinking heavily and live on the streets.

But rebuilding a home on the property he owns in Santa Rosa seems precarious, Struthers said.

"Long-term, do I really want to go that route if another fire sweeps through?" he said. "Now, it's all scorched and everything."

How do you keep wildfire smoke out of your house and car? Here are some tips

By Michael McGough

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, August 21, 2020

Hundreds of wildfires across California are creating poor air quality conditions throughout most of the state. And wildfires are burning in Washington and Idaho.

If you can smell smoke or it makes your eyes sting, you should limit your outdoor time as much as possible because it can be harmful to your respiratory health.

If you're in your home and still can smell smoke, you may want to take some preventive steps to prevent even more of that smokey air from getting in.

Amid wildfire smoke, "if you are advised to stay indoors, take steps to keep indoor air as clean as possible," the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency advises.

How exactly do you do that? Here's some advice compiled from the EPA, the American Lung Association, Sacramento region's Spare the Air and other organizations, including the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

- Keep your home's doors and windows closed.
- Run your home air conditioner, but use the "recirculate" setting. Make sure the air conditioner filter is clean. If the filter is dirty or old, you should replace it.
- Use an air purifier, but make sure it is one that does not produce ozone.
- Check your home's walls, windows and doors for potential openings. Repair or replace any doors or windows with major air leak issues; use caulk on walls or weather-proofing tape or sealants on window to cover up smaller openings. Older homes may be more susceptible to these types of problems, while newer homes are generally built a little bit tighter.
- A ceiling fan won't change the quality of the air within your home; it just recirculates it. But if you are choosing to use a ceiling fan in an effort to keep cool rather than air conditioning because you have concerns about your AC system's filtration, be sure to clean the fan, especially if you don't use it frequently, to rid it of any dust particles that may have built up.
- While driving, also use your air conditioner's recirculate setting. Do not roll down the windows.
- Close air conditioning vents in your vehicle while driving through a particularly smokey area.

'Stay indoors.' Wildfire smoke, unhealthy air quality won't leave Valley this weekend

By Joshua Tehee

Merced Sun-Star and The Fresno Bee, Friday, August 21, 2020

No less than eight of the state's active wildfires are dumping smoke and accompanying particulate matter, including PM2.5, into the Valley air basin – in case you're wondering why the horizon looks straight out of a Star Wars film (just check Instagram) and the air quality has been asthma-triggeringly bad.

Just how unhealthy is our air?

Very, says the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which issued another health caution on Friday, urging residents, especially those with respiratory conditions, young children and the elderly, to remain indoors through the weekend.

“Through this week, PM2.5 concentrations have continued to increase, resulting in very unhealthy air quality across the region,” the district said. “Anyone experiencing poor air quality due to wildfire smoke should move indoors, to a filtered, air-conditioned environment with windows closed. The common cloth and paper masks individuals are wearing due to COVID-19 concerns may not protect them from wildfire smoke.”

The health caution will remain in place until the fires are extinguished, and the district predicts unhealthy air quality to affect the Valley into next week.

You can track the air quality in your area online with the District's Real-time Air Advisory Network, though the district says if you can smell smoke and see ash, the air quality conditions are likely Level 4 or Level 5. This is a good indication that you should limit outdoor activity and remain inside (with air conditioning if possible).

Those with asthma or other lung diseases, should follow doctor's instructions for medicine and asthma management. Some will want to talk with doctors about whether they should leave the area.

What's different about this August?

In terms of air quality, it's ozone (aka smog) that typically affects the Valley during the summer, and there's been a downward trend in ozone levels over the past few years, according to Heather Heinks, an air district spokesperson. Last year was one of the best ozone seasons on records.

What the Valley is experiencing now is reminiscent of the conditions caused by the Camp Fire in 2018.

“Without the wildfires,” Heinks said, “it wouldn't be like this.”

Fire near Patterson is spreading at 120 feet per minute, Cal Fire says

By Patty Guerra and Kristin Lam

Merced Sun-Star and The Fresno Bee, Friday, August 21, 2020

The series of fires that includes the blaze burning in Del Puerto Canyon near Patterson exploded overnight to 137,495 acres, Cal Fire said in a news release Thursday morning.

That's roughly 215 square miles burning in fires believed to be caused by lightning starting on Sunday night.

The fires are spreading as fast at 120 feet per minute, Cal Fire said in a video update posted on its Twitter feed.

Capt. Stephen Volmer, fire behavioral analyst for Cal Fire, said the fire's "spotting distance" is up to three-quarters of a mile.

"We're going to have some of that brush ignite and ... throw fire embers three-quarters of a mile ahead of where the fire (is)," he said. "And when it lands in a receptive fuel bin like the dry grasses and dry brush that's out there, we're going to see new fire."

That is hampering control efforts and helping to spread the fire, Volmer said.

The weather is also complicating matters. Generally, the humidity rises at night, allowing firefighters to make progress.

"On this incident, there's a little phenomenon that's happening," Volmer said. The humidity has been dropping at night, "and that's allowing the fire to burn all day and all night long."

The dry grasses are contributing to the fast spread. "That's putting the fire moving faster than we can actually engage it safely," he said.

Evacuation center reopens

Two evacuees came to the temporary evacuation center at Creekside Middle School in Patterson around 11 a.m. and left shortly after. Five people staffed the gymnasium, which had social distancing rules posted on the door.

Any evacuees are subject to health screenings before entering, said Christopher Losavio, executive director of the local Red Cross chapter. The organization also helped set up hotel rooms for some evacuees Wednesday night, Losavio said in a text, and may do so again Thursday if there is a need.

On Wednesday, at least five people were injured in the fire and had to be rescued, authorities said.

Smoky air all the way to Modesto

Smoke and ash in the air for miles around led to a health warning from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. According to the district's air monitors, air quality in cities as far away as Modesto, Turlock and Merced remained poor as of midafternoon Thursday.

Stanislaus County Sheriff Jeff Dirkse said that the department's helicopter was able to fly from the canyon to Frank Raines Park to assess the damage on Wednesday, and found that more than half the buildings, which he described as either houses, hunting shacks or outbuildings, did not have noticeable damage.

He said the helicopter would be back Thursday when deputies could do a more complete search of the canyon. On Friday, they planned to assess damage west of Newman. They could not get to that area on Wednesday because of the fire.

Evacuation areas change

Cal Fire has expanded the evacuation order to include areas in San Joaquin County. Now under mandatory evacuation order is the area south of West Corral Hollow Road to the Stanislaus County line, west of Interstate 580 to the Alameda County line and east of Alameda County line to I-580 and Stanislaus County.

An evacuation warning has been issued for the area of San Joaquin County north of West Corral Hollow Road to I-580 and east of the Alameda County line to I-580, and the PAR Country Estates neighborhood near Tracy.

At 1:30 p.m. Thursday, Cal Fire lifted the mandatory evacuation order for the Diablo Grande community, though the area remains under an evacuation warning.

Update: Moccasin Fire in Tuolumne County continues to spread

By Marijke Rowland and Julian A. Lopez
The Fresno Bee, Thursday, August 20, 2020

Update: The Moccasin Fire had reached over 1,700 acres and “hundreds of homes” are threatened according to the Tuolumne County Sheriff’s Department Facebook page late Thursday evening.

Mandatory evacuations had been issued for multiple areas including: Groveland and Pine Mountain Lake, Highway 120 to Boneyard, Second Garrote, and Incense Cedar Trail, and everything west of Second Garrote, Cherokee Trail, and Yosemite Springs. Old Highway 120 has been added as well.

All Jackass Creek Road, Jackass Creek Ridge, and Jackass Ridge access are also mandatory evacuation.

Evacuation warnings had also been issued for: Highway 49 North from the Mariposa/Tuolumne County Line to Mary Harrison Mine Road, and Highway 132 from the 4700 Block of Greeley Hill Road to Priest Coulterville Road.

The sheriff’s department reported that westbound Highway 120 was open to those evacuating.

There had been no reports of damaged property as of 9:30 p.m.

Original Story:

A vegetation fire that started near Moccasin in Tuolumne County Thursday afternoon has spread rapidly east forcing mandatory evacuations in the area.

The fire was first reported shortly before 2 p.m. near Highway 49 and Highway 120 in the southwest corner of the foothills county, west of Groveland. The then five-acre fire closed Highway 49 at the Highway 120 junction, to allow fire crews to access the area. The fire then grew in size quickly, according to alerts from the Tuolumne County Sheriff’s Department Facebook page.

By 3:45 p.m. the fire had grown to 300 acres and a forced mandatory evacuation order from Highway 120 at Moccasin through Big Oak Flat, to Merrell Road in Groveland. The evacuation area includes Priest Coulterville Road. The fire is moving east at a “critical rate of speed,” according the sheriff’s department.

Power has been shut off from Moccasin through Big Oak Flat to Merrell Road in Groveland as well.

The sheriff’s department said evacuation centers are being set up at the Mariposa Fairgrounds, 5007 Fairgrounds Road in Mariposa, and the Manzanita Building at the Mother Lode Fairgrounds, 220 Southgate Drive in Sonora.

Officials from Tuolumne County Animal Control (209-694-2730) and Team ELITE (which stands for Evacuation of Livestock in Tuolumne Emergencies, 209-782-0616) will be on standby to assist with animals.

The state’s firefighting forces have been stretched thin as dozens of wildfires, many sparked by lightning from the recent heat wave, have broken out across California.

Due to the fire, the sheriff’s department said its dispatch center will not be taking any non-emergency calls. For non-emergencies contact the sheriff’s office at 209-533-6505 or 209-533-5833.

The Bee will have more on this fire and the evacuation order as it becomes available.

At least 5 people killed in Northern California wildfires

By Janie Har and Martha Mendoza, Associated Press
The Fresno Bee, Thursday, August 20, 2020

SANTA CRUZ, Calif.

Dozens of wildfires raging throughout Northern California have now claimed at least five lives and threaten tens of thousands of homes, authorities said Thursday.

The death of a resident in Solano County, in the northeastern San Francisco Bay Area, was reported Thursday by Sheriff Thomas A. Ferrara, although he didn't have any additional details.

In addition, three civilians had died in Napa County since the fires began, said Daniel Berlant, a Cal Fire assistant deputy director. In all, more than 30 civilians and firefighters have been injured.

It wasn't immediately clear whether the Solano and Napa county fatalities included a Pacific Gas & Electric utility worker who was found dead Wednesday in a vehicle in the Vacaville area between San Francisco and Sacramento.

A pilot on a water-dropping mission in central California also died Wednesday when his helicopter crashed.

Gov. Gavin Newsom addressed the wildfires, calling them clear evidence of climate change, in a last-minute video recorded for the Democratic National Convention from a forest near Watsonville after he visited an evacuation center.

"If you are in denial about climate change, come to California," he said.

"I confess this is not where I expected to be speaking here tonight," he said into what appeared to be a cellphone camera. Newsom had recorded an earlier, more lighthearted video, to be delivered in the convention's prime-time hours but decided it didn't bring the right tone amid his state's disasters, said Dan Newman, one of his political advisers.

More than two dozen major fires were scorching California and taxing the state's firefighting capacity, sparked by an unprecedented lightning siege that dropped nearly 11,000 strikes over several days.

The fires have destroyed 175 structures, including homes, and are threatening 50,000 more, said Daniel Berlant, an assistant deputy director with the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. In all, 33 civilians and firefighters have been injured.

At least two people were missing.

Smoke and ash billowing from the fires has fouled the air throughout the scenic central coast and San Francisco.

Most of the activity is in Northern California, where fires have chewed through about 500 square miles (1,250 square kilometers) of brushland, rural areas, canyon country and dense forest surrounding San Francisco.

More than 10,000 firefighters are on the front lines, but fire officials in charge of each of the major fire complexes say they are strapped for resources. Some firefighters were working 72-hour shifts instead of the usual 24 hours. The state has requested 375 engines and crew from other states.

"That's going to allow our firefighters that have been on the front line since this weekend to have an opportunity to take some rest," Berlant said.

More firefighters were sent to battle a complex of fires in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties but "it's still not enough," said the incident commander, Cal Fire Assistant Chief Billy See.

"We're still drastically short for a fire of this size," he said at an evening news conference.

Fire officials said the flames were being driven by bone-dry timber and brush and erratic winds. They pleaded with residents to be ready to evacuate when ordered because they place firefighters in danger when crews have to protect those staying behind.

"Today we saw a growth of approximately 700 to 1,000 acres an hour in heavy timber," See said. "That's a dangerous rate of spread for our firefighters and for all those residents out there."

Cal Fire spokesman Dan Olson said there are concerns that some people are trying to organize through social media to create volunteer brigades and fight the fire themselves.

"The dangers out there to their own lives outweigh anything they can accomplish," he said. "They're putting their lives in jeopardy."

In Marin County, just north of San Francisco, where a smaller fire is burning near the Pacific Ocean, county fire chief Jason Weber said he is waiting for assistance from Montana to arrive this weekend.

He said in his 25 years in fire service, "we've never seen this level of draw-down" from cooperating agencies, as there is heavy competition in the western United States for equipment and people.

In the coastal mountain regions south of San Francisco, where 48,000 people were under orders to evacuate, a fire complex had burned 75 square miles (194 square kilometers). Officials warned it has the potential to grow significantly in the next day.

At least 50 buildings, including homes, had burned and nearly 21,000 structures were threatened, fire officials said.

Given depleted resources, one of the best tools firefighters have for public safety is to get people out of harm's way. But some people refused when officers went door-to-door Wednesday night, Cal Fire Chief Mark Brunton said.

Kevin Stover, 42, was struggling with indecision early Thursday when a mandatory evacuation order was issued for the rugged and small town of Felton outside the beach city of Santa Cruz.

"I don't want to leave," said Stover, a camera operator and rigger now driving for Door Dash and Lyft because of the pandemic. His car, loaded with important papers, his father's urn and some arrowheads that meant a lot to him, had a flat tire.

"I'm trying to figure out if I should cut these original oil paintings out of the frame to salvage them," he said.

The unusually large size and number of simultaneous fires, other fires throughout the West and the loss of inmate firefighting crews because inmates were released from prisons to prevent the spread of coronavirus, have created the perfect storm for firefighting.

"Our agency is taxed to the limit," said Incident Commander Mike Smith at the fire near Santa Cruz. Officials there are awaiting help from other states, but they are having to look further afield than usual, meaning it will take days for crews to arrive, he said. The U.S. Forest Service can't help because they are busy fighting fires on federal lands.

In Monterey County along the coast, about 9,000 people have been evacuated for a fire that's now 52 square miles (136 square kilometers).

Two fires in Sonoma County prompted evacuation orders for 8,000 residents near the Russian River Wednesday. Residents of Healdsburg, with a population of about 12,000, were warned Wednesday night to be ready to flee. Fires in that region destroyed more than 100 buildings, including some homes, and threatened 25,000 people across five counties.

Tim Edwards, president of the union representing 7,000 Cal Fire firefighters, said lawmakers need to allocate more money at a time when firefighters are working 40 to 50 days at a time without real relief.

California State Parks announced full or partial closures of more than two dozen parks, including Big Basin Redwoods in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where the park headquarters and other facilities were damaged. The park featuring towering stands of ancient coast redwoods dates to 1902 and is the state's oldest.

California's weary firefighters are working double shifts. When will backup arrive?

By Ryan Sabalow and Jason Pohl
The Fresno Bee, Thursday, August 20, 2020

Vacaville

Exhausted and working double shifts on nearly 400 wildfires, California firefighters were still waiting for many of the relief crews that were trickling into the state Thursday.

On Wednesday, officials announced they had requested 375 fire engines from out of state to join the 6,900 firefighters battling lightning-sparked fires that have destroyed nearly 200 buildings and are threatening 50,000 more. Tens of thousands of people have been ordered to evacuate.

But many of those out-of-state crews had yet to arrive to relieve the California firefighters, even though many have been working 72-hour double shifts, said Brice Bennett, a Cal Fire spokesman.

“The goal is to get them here so we can put them to work and utilize them to provide some reprieve from our initial attack resources,” Bennett said. “We need to make sure we can get them rested and refueled. The firefight is long from over.”

Doug Rogers, deputy fire chief of the Vacaville Fire Protection District, said his volunteer crews spent had been hauling hoses up and down the hills in 104-degree heat early in the week trying to snuff out the earliest of the lightning-caused fires. They thought they’d succeeded.

Then came the wind, and the fire “started coming down with a vengeance.” A firefighter for 50 years, mostly with departments around Sacramento, Rogers said he’d never seen anything like it. He and his teams worked nonstop for about 48 hours, before getting a break Wednesday night.

“By last night,” Rogers said, “asses were dragging pretty good.”

They were back out Thursday, working with Cal Fire crews on damage assessments near Quail Canyon Road. Their partners were inmate firefighters from the nearby prison.

Such inmate labor is in short supply. Inmates serve as the state’s primary “hand crews,” using tools and chainsaws to cut fire lines and protect property.

The COVID-19 outbreak in state prisons prompted officials to release thousands of inmates early. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation said that no inmate crews are currently on COVID-19 lockdown, but the number of inmate firefighters are down significantly since last summer.

In 2019, there were 2,800 inmate firefighters. This year, there are only 2,026.

In response to the pandemic, Gov. Gavin Newsom’s administration hired 830 new temporary firefighters to help offset the shortage.

In Marin County, just north of San Francisco, where a small fire is burning near the Pacific Ocean, county fire chief Jason Weber told The Associated Press he is waiting for assistance from Montana to arrive this weekend.

He said in his 25 years in fire service, “we’ve never seen this level of draw-down” from cooperating agencies, as there is heavy competition in the western United States for equipment and people.

Fighting fires from the air

With not enough personnel to cover so many fires burning at once, the state’s firefighting air corps has proven critical to fighting some fires.

May Eldridge, a spokeswoman for Cal Fire’s Nevada-Yuba-Placer Unit, said if not for pilots making drop after drop of fire retardant on the Jones Fire, “it could have been catastrophic.”

Over two days, pilots dumped 96,000 gallons of fire retardant, more than the Grass Valley Air Attack Base used all last year.

“Our biggest challenge with this fire was the slope,” Eldridge said. “It’s on the side of a mountain and so air resources were really the only thing that could get to it very quickly because our boots on the ground were literally climbing down into a canyon to get to it with hand tools to try to do something.”

The Grass Valley air base is one of 12 air attack and 10 helitack bases scattered across the state.

But Bennett said it's misguided to assume that firefighting aircraft alone are going to make up for not having enough personnel.

"Fire retardant does not put out fires," Bennett said. "All it does slow it down, and that's so the boots on the ground can actually get close enough to it to put it out. Air tankers are not always the answer, especially when there are winds over 30 mph. Their drops are completely ineffective."

He didn't immediately know the number of firefighting aircraft working the fires on Thursday.

The state has ordered a dozen new firefighting helicopters, at \$25 million apiece, but they won't all arrive until 2022. Similarly, a fleet of seven C-130 transport planes being purchased from the Pentagon has to be retrofitted and won't begin to show up until next year.

In the meantime, expect things to continue to stay smokey and communities to remain under threat in the days ahead, Bennett said.

"We have a substantial number of fires going right now," Bennett said. "And we're still on the upward swing from all these incidents from this lightning siege."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

California Fires Claim 5 Lives, Threaten Thousands of Homes

AP News

GV Wire, Friday, August 21, 2020

SANTA CRUZ — Sky-darkening wildfires that took at least five lives and forced thousands of people from their homes blazed throughout California on Friday as firefighting resources strained under the vastness of the infernos authorities were trying to control.

Three major complexes encompassing dozens of fires chewed through a combined 770 square miles of forests, canyons, and rural areas north, east, and south of San Francisco Bay. Thousands of acres were ablaze elsewhere in the state.

Three major complexes encompassing dozens of fires chewed through a combined 770 square miles of forests, canyons, and rural areas north, east, and south of San Francisco Bay. Thousands of acres were ablaze elsewhere in the state.

Tens of thousands of homes were threatened by flames that drove through dense and bone-dry trees and brush. Many of the fires were sparked by lightning strikes from brief thunderstorms this week as a high-pressure area over the West brought a dangerous mix of triple-digit weather and monsoonal moisture pulled from the south.

Some fires doubled in size within 24 hours, fire officials said.

And while some evacuations were lifted in the small city of Vacaville, between San Francisco and Sacramento, other areas expanded their evacuation areas. The University of California, Santa Cruz, was evacuated and a new fire burning near Yosemite National Park also prompted evacuations.

Santa Cruz itself, a coastal city of 65,000, wasn't affected but Mayor Justin Cummings urged residents Thursday evening to be prepared to evacuate by gassing up their vehicles and packing important documents, medicines, and other belongings.

"Prepare early so that you are ready to go at a moment's notice," Cummings said.

Although temperatures were predicted to ease slightly on Friday, they were also expected to be hot enough so that firefighters will not be able to count on cool evening weather aiding them. Erratic winds also could drive the fires unpredictably in multiple directions, state fire officials said.

More Than 64,000 People Ordered to Evacuate in Santa Cruz, San Mateo Counties

“There’s so much heat in these fires that they create their own wind ... and they may blow in any direction, and very erratically,” said Daniel Berlant, an assistant deputy director with the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, known as Cal Fire.

Winds gusting to 20 mph over ridge tops could challenge the overnight firefighting efforts in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties, said the incident commander, Cal Fire Assistant Chief Billy See.

“This country likes to burn at night, more so than during the day, and that’s because of the wind patterns,” he said.

More than 64,000 people were ordered evacuated in those counties.

The ferocity of the fires was astonishing so early in the fire season, which historically has seen the largest and deadliest blazes when gusty, dry winds blow in the fall.

But the death toll already had reached at least five since the majority of blazes started less than a week ago.

Berlant said three civilians died in Napa County and one died in neighboring Solano County since the fires began. He didn’t have details but Solano County Sheriff Thomas A. Ferrara reported the death of a male resident there.

It wasn’t immediately clear whether the fatalities included a Pacific Gas & Electric utility worker who was found dead Wednesday in a vehicle in the Vacaville area.

Also, in central California, a pilot on a water-dropping mission in western Fresno County died Wednesday morning when his helicopter crashed.

At Least 175 Buildings Destroyed and Tens of Thousands Threatened

At least two other people were missing and more than 30 civilians and firefighters have been injured, authorities said.

Tim and Anne Roberts had gone to the beach with their two children on Monday to avoid the smoke at their home in Boulder Creek in Santa Cruz County. They packed a change of clothes, their children’s school supplies, and their passports — just in case.

Smoke and ash billowing from the fires also fouled the air throughout California’s scenic central coast and in San Francisco.

The fires have destroyed at least 175 buildings, including homes, and threatened tens of thousands more.

Tim and Anne Roberts had gone to the beach with their two children on Monday to avoid the smoke at their home in Boulder Creek in Santa Cruz County. They packed a change of clothes, their children’s school supplies and their passports — just in case.

They learned Wednesday that their house had burned. Birth certificates, legal documents, and family heirlooms are gone. But in photos of the ruins, they were surprised by how many redwoods, oaks and fruit trees were still standing.

“It’s a strange sort of comfort,” Tim Roberts said.

The good news for Brookdale resident Larissa Eisenstein Thursday afternoon was that her five chickens, Kelly and The Nuggets, had been safely relocated into a stranger’s yard in a safer, neighboring community.

The chicken evacuation came a day after Eisenstein, a Silicon Valley tech worker, had been forced to leave them behind during an overnight evacuation. She fled with her cats Mochi and Mini, driving from one hotel to the next only to find they were full before landing in a safe place where they could get some rest.

Some 3,000 Firefighters Had Arrived in the Past 24 Hours

The bad news Thursday was that the fire was burning down her wooded street as she adjusted to the idea that her worldly possessions may now be limited to photos of her parents, some jewelry she had grabbed, and fresh tomatoes from her garden.

"After I got the cats, I realized there was very little important to me, and the priority is to try to remember how lovely things can be," she said. "I've had a wonderful garden this year."

More than 10,000 firefighters were on the front lines. Some 3,000 firefighters had arrived in the past 24 hours, along with hundreds of fire engines from neighboring states, and National Guard troops that were staffing hand crews and flying helicopters, Berlant said.

Some C-130 military aircraft also had been outfitted as air tankers, Berlant said.

More firefighters were sent to battle the complex of fires in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties but "it's still not enough," See said.

"We're still drastically short for a fire of this size," he said.

Cal Fire spokesman Dan Olson said there are concerns that some people are trying to organize through social media to create volunteer brigades and fight the fire themselves.

"The dangers out there to their own lives outweigh anything they can accomplish," he said. "They're putting their lives in jeopardy."

In a last-minute video recorded for the Democratic National Convention, Gov. Gavin Newsom said "if you are in denial about climate change, come to California."

California Looks to Battle Mega Wildfires with Fire

By Jane Braxton Little, Scientific American
GV Wire, Thursday, August 20, 2020

As flames once again rage across the state, officials embrace a counterintuitive firefighting approach

Kyburz, Calif.—Near the top of a 7,000-foot ridge in California's Sierra Nevada, crews wielding gasoline-dripping torches began igniting piles of small logs and branches on an unusually cold morning late last September. Ignoring snow flurries and light rain, they trudged from one pile to another, nursing the flames that licked into pine needles and twigs on the surrounding ground and monitoring small trees that flared up like bonfires.

The fire starters worked their way down the mountain north of Caples Creek over the next week, their blazes efficiently controlled with the help of "lanes" that had been cleared of forest debris. They supervised flames racing across meadows that, remarkably, had not burned since at least 1916. Crews paid particular attention to the largest Jeffrey and ponderosa pines, some of them 300 years old. These trees had been protected in advance by volunteers, who had removed shrubs and raked fuels away from trunks that were more than 30 inches in diameter. By the time the flames were out, the Caples Ecological Restoration Project had burned 3,435 acres in the mountainous watershed of Eldorado National Forest, 70 miles east of Sacramento—part of an area that provides the primary water supply for more than 110,000 people. It was the largest intentional fire ever set in the Sierra Nevada and one of the largest on federal land in the state.

The effort marks a milestone in California's pivot away from a century of suppressing fire at all costs and toward working with it instead—using controlled flames to restore ecosystems that evolved to burn in frequent, mostly low-intensity blazes. Suppression has left forests throughout the West unnaturally crowded with small trees and shrubs—ready tinder for larger, far more damaging conflagrations. California's forests are even more vulnerable because more than 147 million drought-weakened trees have died statewide since 2010, leaving them primed to burn. Because of these and other factors, such as poor management practices and warmer temperatures from climate change, the extent of fires that escape even the most aggressive suppression has increased fivefold over the past five decades. Scientists say tangled masses of ultradry fuel represent a fire hazard of unprecedented size and intensity if left alone. Blazes this year, including the Lake Fire in the mountains north of Los Angeles and the L.N.U. Lightning Complex west of Sacramento, have already burned 30 percent more than the acreage

flames blackened across California last year, stretching firefighting crews thin and prompting Governor Gavin Newsom to declare a state of emergency.

U.S. Forest Service officials had been planning the Caples prescribed burn for five years—nervously hoping the forest would not go up in flames sparked by lightning or a careless camper before they could implement their meticulously designed, scientific burn strategy. “This is all about reintroducing fire back into the landscape: restoring that vital natural ecosystem process, which will ultimately slow the spread of wildfire,” says Jeff Marsolais, Eldorado’s forest supervisor.

Planned and Unplanned

In 2011 Eldorado forest officials identified the steep, granite-strewn slopes of the Caples Creek area as a priority for restoration efforts that would gradually reintroduce fire and restore the meadows dotting the pine and fir forests. Funded by a \$477,000 Sierra Nevada Conservancy grant, the plan scientists developed involves 8,800 acres of prescribed burning over 15 years to reduce the heavy load of flammable low-lying vegetation. Along with preventing huge and uncontrollable wildfires, they aim to reestablish forests healthy enough to allow small fires to burn unimpeded. The path of the Caples prescribed burn was designed to promote a mixture of species in a mosaic, with large openings between tree stands where fire could occasionally burn undergrowth without damaging large trees. “We wanted to reintroduce fire where it would bring the greatest benefits and inflict the least harm,” says Forest Service ecologist Becky Estes, who designed the monitoring plots in the Caples burn.

Not everything in the project went as envisioned. Unexpected high winds roared through the area 10 days into the carefully calculated plan, blowing the intentional fire out of the 1,080-acre designated zone and into forests that had not been prepared for burning. Eldorado forest officials brought in suppression crews, halting the escaped fire after it burned through 2,355 acres.

Such glitches are part of the learning process as forest managers try bringing fire back to the Sierra Nevada after 100 years of fighting it off, says Tony Scardina, deputy forester of national forests in California. “We understand that when we’re managing fire, whether it’s a wildland or a planned fire, there’s always risk,” he says. But Scardina is undaunted. “We remain committed to bringing those ecosystems back to a resilient state in a planned, careful and controlled manner,” he says. “And we are committed to applying what we learned from this situation to continuously improve our prescribed fire program.”

Checking In

Scardina and others had to wait for winter snows to melt—and for Forest Service officials to come up with COVID-19 pandemic protocols that made it safe for a group of scientists to inspect the burned area to see what was growing come spring. Nine months after the fire, the trail along Caples Creek climbs through gray granite boulders and purple lupines blooming among charred logs. Blackened tree trunks rise out of thick grass carpets, and the sun filters through a canopy of conifer needles, half of them green, half of them scorched rust-red. Helen Payne, a botanist in Estes’s ecological field-monitoring crew, is on her hands and knees just off the trail on a hot July morning, examining a spindly cedar tree with black burn streaks on its trunk. Behind her, fire-felled pines the size of utility poles are toppled against trees that are still standing but weakened by fire, likely to fall in the next big storm. The ground is littered with dry needles sprinkled across the ashes of last year’s burn.

Payne is taking inventory of every detail within an area about the size of a home swimming pool: the presence of seedlings, flowering plants and fungi, as well as the size and number of trees and whether they are healthy, scorched or fire-killed. This plot is one of 105 that Estes established before the burn to monitor its effects on as much of the vegetation as possible—every five years for the foreseeable future. Payne points to a tiny seedling, its trunk no thicker than darning thread but somehow supporting the fragile fronds of new life. “We found two,” she says, clearly excited by the speed of rejuvenation.

Data collected at 46 monitoring plots in a November assessment have provided information about the immediate effects of the fire. Despite intense burning in some places and an extra 2,355 acres catching fire, the experiment generally produced healthier forests, says Scott Dailey, one of the Forest Service ecologists who conducted the assessment. Before the burn, eight-inch-diameter saplings were nearly triple the density scientists believe a resilient forest should harbor. These small trees ignite easily,

providing a ladder for fire to climb into the tops of large ones. The part of the blaze that got away actually cut their number to a more sustainable density—and the intentional fire did not reduce them as much as officials would have liked, Dailey says. The prescribed burn did not kill any trees greater than 30 inches in diameter, but these centuries-old survivors did not fare so well in the escaped wildfire. Among the plots he surveyed in that area, Dailey found nearly 25 percent fewer large trees after the fire.

The prescribed burn effectively reduced the ground litter under trees, where wildfires generally start, knocking the average litter depth down from around two inches to less than half an inch. The wildfire was even more effective: nearly two and a half inches of duff were reduced to around one third of an inch. Overall, the combined Caples planned burn and inadvertent wildfire produced forests much closer to natural conditions, Dailey says. Still, there was some damage: The bulldozers brought in to control the escaped flames left scars on the forest floor. And trees were haphazardly strewn about some areas, because firefighters had to fell them to suppress the blaze.

One of the lessons Caples taught managers is the crucial role of meteorology, Marsolais says. No one predicted the winds that blew the fire beyond the planned area. “Our forecasting has only so much capability. We’re focusing now on how good predictions can be,” he says. The burn also made clear that many forests in the Sierra Nevada are simply too crowded for fire to return without the extraordinary effort that went into preparing the Caples area. “You can’t just put fire back on the landscape,” Marsolais says.

Small but Important Step

The Caples prescribed burn is an important first step—but a small one—in a long march toward restoring forest resilience, says Malcolm North, a U.S. Forest Service scientist at the Pacific Southwest Research Station. He studies Sierra Nevada forests but was not involved in the Caples burn. To return forests to their original state (in which they survive and benefit from natural fire), he says crews would have to burn 500,000 acres a year on the five million acres the Forest Service manages in the Sierra Nevada. The agency’s “fuels reduction” goal for this year is 230,000 acres, including just 60,000 acres of prescribed burning. For the rest, chain saws and other mechanical equipment will be used to thin trees. “Whatever we can do to change the pace and scale of prescribed burning, that’s the 99.9 percent priority,” North says.

Forest resilience has implications for most of California’s residents. The effects of unhealthy forests have proliferated, particularly following the devastating wildfires of 2018. Homeowners’ insurance rates doubled and tripled for those lucky enough to get policies at all. Too many people have experienced the terror of wildfires bearing down on them, forcing last-minute evacuations and taking dozens of lives. Most pervasive, however, are the effects of the smoke that smothers cities, small towns and rural areas alike, increasing the risk of asthma and other respiratory problems.

Public acceptance of smoke is one of the greatest challenges facing the drive to return natural fire to the Sierra Nevada’s forests. Prescribed burns do emit smoke—but the smoke from wildfires carries far more toxic ingredients from burned homes and vehicles, Marsolais says. Craig Thomas, former executive director of Sierra Forest Legacy, a nonprofit conservation group, calls smoke a trade-off. He has engaged air resource officials through a multiparty collaboration to improve coordination between the management of fire and public health. Because California’s Sierra Nevada forests have a natural propensity to ignite, whether as wildfires or controlled burns, Thomas says, “we either work with fire, or it eats our lunch.”

Eldorado forest officials will continue to study the effects of the Caples burn as they prepare for the next prescribed fire, likely in an adjacent area in 2021. Restoring forest health and ecosystem values at a meaningful scale is a long-term process, Marsolais says. “We cannot let up,” he adds. “Uncontrolled wildfire is knocking on the doors of these communities.”

Residents advised to stay indoors due to poor air quality

By Erick Torres, Patterson Irrigator
Tracy Press, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020

Air quality in Patterson has been rated as “very unhealthy” with an air quality index rating (AQI) of 209 by the AirNow resource tool that uses data from the California Air Resources Board. The AQI rating runs

from 0-500. The higher the AQI value, the greater level of air pollution, and the greater the health concern.

AQI ratings are divided into six categories with each category corresponding to a different level of health concern. Each level is assigned a color. A 209 AQI rating puts the health alert at the second to the highest purple category labeled "very unhealthy," meaning that the risk of health effects is increased for everyone in the area.

Weather conditions are expected to persist through Saturday, so residents in the area will continue to see smoke impacts from regional fires.

Residents are suggested to limit strenuous outdoor activities and consider moving physical activities indoors or rescheduling them. People with heart or lung disease, older adults, children and teens should avoid physical activities outdoors.

Health risks can include stinging eyes, irritated respiratory system, headaches, and aggravated chronic heart disease due to compromised air quality.

Residents should remain indoors as much as possible and use air conditioning and an air filter to aid with the poor air quality.

A Perfect Storm for Fire

By Katie Evans, Press Banner Staff Reporter
Tracy Press, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020

If you were rudely awakened this past Saturday night, August 15th, you weren't alone. A heat wave reaching above 100 degree temperatures have caused many valley residents to open doors and windows at night throughout this week, with hopes for a cool breeze. However, residents got more than they expected at 3 a.m., when huge gusts of wind and a brilliant lightning storm swept across Santa Cruz County. Some folks slept through, others watched from bed, a few saddled up their pup for an impromptu dog walk, and others, like 17-year-old Scotts Valley resident Jackson Damhorst, captured the stunning and fearsome event with their lens. Regardless of how you experienced it, our community is still fighting the storm's effects.

Lightning strikes, hot temperatures, and winds proved a perfect recipe for fires throughout the County, like the 120-acre Warrenella Fire in Davenport and the 118-acre fire near Waddell Beach. Several smaller fires burned in our valleys, like one in Zayante, off Eagle Tree Lane. Robert Gray, the Felton Fire Protection District Chief, had a moment to discuss fire conditions in San Lorenzo. "There's so many smaller fires at this point, that it's difficult to sum up exact numbers, sizes, locations, and states of containment. I can tell you, about 80 to 90% of fires are currently under 10 acres and caused by [lightning] ground strikes... We've sent resources to all different areas, mostly assisting neighboring agencies with fires, fallen trees, and downed power lines." Gray shared the unique difficulties in putting out San Lorenzo Valley fires, "Almost all of our fires are on steep terrain, in difficult to access areas. The fires [still burning in SLV] are in remote areas that makes finding and fighting them difficult... You can see the smoke, but how do you get there?"

While the terrain distinct to San Lorenzo makes firefighters' tasks quite arduous, Gray gives this advice to ease their burden, "The biggest thing the community can do is be prepared. We get so many calls are from those that aren't. They find themselves in situations that they could've been prepared for. Know your limitations. Figure out a plan for self-sufficiency if you lose power. What are you going to do with medical supplies that require refrigeration? Do you have flashlights, batteries, canned goods? A way to contact loved ones?" Gray adds, "We're always there to assist in a jam, but if people take the initiative, we can go to more dangerous situations that utilize our specialized training."

Gray and I then discussed protocol for those aforementioned dangerous situations. "First you need to recognize the situation. If you see or smell smoke, you don't necessarily need to call 911 right away. With wind shifts, smoke can roll in almost like a fog bank, which is frightening for community members. However, you should only call if a defined column of smoke or flames are in sight." The Fire Chief touched on another vital resource to keep yourself informed on the current state of fires. "Code

Red is an emergency alert system to pass vital information from us to the community. If wires are blocking a road, we can pinpoint where we want the alert to go, maybe it's a 1/2-mile radius or certain streets. Code Red gives information to community that's specific to their needs." However, you must enroll online to receive alerts and, according to Gray, many community members have yet to do so. You can easily enroll for the lifesaving alert service by logging onto <https://scr911.org/> and clicking on the Code Red link.

Even if your current living situation is safely away from fire, you can still be at risk from inhalation of smoke. Richard Stedman, the Air Pollution Control Officer of the Monterey Bay Air Resources District shared these helpful guide lines:

- When the concentration of smoke has reached orange, red, purple, or maroon levels of the [Air Quality Index] residents should limit their activity by staying indoors with the doors and windows closed to avoid breathing smoke. You may want to check with your health care provider to make sure it's not necessary for you to leave the area to where wildfire smoke is diminished or not present.
- Use common sense. If it looks smoky outside, it's not a good time to exercise or work outside and it's not a good time for your children to play outdoors.
- Help lower inside particle levels inside your home. When smoke levels are high, avoid using anything that burns, such as wood fireplaces, gas logs, gas stoves – even candles. Don't vacuum as that stirs up particles already inside your home. And don't smoke. That puts even more pollution in your lungs, and in the lungs of people around you.
- We are asking residents to avoid adding more pollution to the air by limiting activities such as wood burning, driving, lawn mowing, and leaf blowing. Also, drive your car only if absolutely necessary and combine trips, when possible, to reduce pollution.

With these tips you can stay safe and healthy during wildfire season. Please help ease the strain on our first responders by staying prepared, informed, and aware. If you haven't yet joined the Code Red alert service, do so at <https://scr911.org/>. Visit <https://gispub.epa.gov/airnow/> for an updated and interactive air quality map. If you'd like to help out the Felton Fire Protection District, they're now looking for volunteers at <https://feltonfire.com/joinus/>.

Wildfire smoke blankets Central Valley with no end in sight

By Quinn Wilson

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Aug. 21, 2020

The sun — apparently — also rises over Bakersfield and much of the Central Valley, despite the dense wildfire smoke clouding much of the sky.

The seemingly perpetual twilight state was sparked by a weather system Wednesday that caused smoke from a cluster of Northern California wildfires to drift across the valley, according to Heather Heinks, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's outreach and communications manager.

"People need to plan on hunkering down for a few days," Heinks said Thursday. "If the heat hasn't already driven you inside, the air quality certainly will."

Heinks explained that the current conditions are hazardous for anybody, whether they have a preexisting respiratory condition or are perfectly healthy. She even said the air quality can "exacerbate" any symptoms or illness related to COVID-19.

"Healthy people would even feel the effects (of the air quality) after prolonged exposure with symptoms like having a scratchy throat, tightness in the chest and a headache the next day," Heinks said.

The cloth masks typically used to prevent the spread of COVID-19, she said, are not very effective in protecting yourself from poor air quality. While she said N95 masks would be more effective to protect against the air issues, no formal recommendations have been made due to their limited availability.

Lt. Joel Swanson, public information officer for the Kern County Sheriff's Office, said that the KCSO's ongoing academy has suspended all of its outdoor activity due to the air conditions. He explained the Sheriff's Office is "doing what they can" to make sure recruits meet the state's fitness standards.

"Our academy is held at a former airport hangar, so we can do some activities in our airport hangar," Swanson said. "The temperatures are also affecting that; it's a very hot building."

Swanson said the KCSO's air division has not been impacted by reduced visibility. However, the Federal Aviation Administration advises all flights be grounded when visibility is 3 miles or less. As of Thursday afternoon, the visibility at Meadows Field Airport was at 5 miles, according to Jeff Barlow, senior meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Hanford.

The Kern County Public Health Services Department recommends residents stay indoors when possible, limit outdoor activity, and close windows and doors.

"These actions are particularly important for our more vulnerable residents that include children, pregnant women, older adults and those with existing lung or heart conditions," said Michelle Corson, spokeswoman for the health department.

Barlow said there is currently no outlook as to when the smoke will subside and that it will likely "slosh around the valley for a while."

"Fire repression is obviously key and the weather drives these fires," Barlow said. "There aren't much but some light winds so (the smoke) really isn't moving anywhere and is just drifting to the east into Nevada and up into Idaho."

Andrew Freeborn, public information officer for the Kern County Fire Department, explained that Kern County sits between "a few" significant wildfires happening from all directions. He said to the south there's the Holzer Fire and the Lake Fire, to the east is the Dome Fire and then in central and Northern California, there are 200,000 to 300,000 acres of land burning.

"We've got so much in the state going on right now. Amongst this heat wave, we had a barrage of thousands of lightning strikes around the state that caused a lot of (the fires)," Freeborn said. "We need to be making sure we're not inadvertently starting any other fires."

With elevated pollution levels noted in the Tehachapi, Rosamond and Mojave areas, the Eastern Kern Air Pollution Control District on Thursday urged children, older adults and anyone with heart and lung problems to avoid outdoor activity if they can smell or see smoke.

Smoke from several fires, including from the Lake Fire in Lake Hughes in the unincorporated area of Los Angeles, is impacting several communities, the Eastern Kern air district noted in a news release.

One unintentionally positive impact the smoke has had on the Central Valley is that temperatures have managed to stay down from the lack of direct sunlight, according to Barlow.

"The smoke acts the same way as clouds would and it's like an overcast day so we went ahead and canceled the heat warning," Barlow said Thursday.

As the state has been on the brink of a potential energy crisis since last Friday, Katie Allen, marketing and communications manager for Pacific Gas and Electric, said PG&E has not had to enact any rotating blackouts throughout its service area since this weekend.

As of Thursday afternoon, the California Independent System Operator did not call for a "Flex Alert" for the first time since Sunday.

Heinks explained that even though the valley air district may only be calling for a "moderate" air quality day, its monitors are only tracking fine particulate matter and not the larger bits of ash that have been seen falling from the wildfires.

"The see-and-smell rule prevails over monitors; treat it like a level 4 (air quality day), or worse," Heinks said.

She said residents can check current air quality conditions online at www.valleyair.org/myraan/ and can also check out a variety of resources regarding the current wildfires at valleyair.org/wildfires/.

GET bus offering free rides Friday due to poor air quality in the region

The Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020

Golden Empire Transit District will provide FREE rides Friday because of poor air quality currently in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

According to a GET news release, the local Air Quality Index is over 150, which is considered unhealthy and potentially hazardous to the general population.

High temperatures and smoke caused by statewide forest fires have caused the spike in poor air quality this week locally.

“GET is committed to the environment and exceptional customer service,” said CEO Karen King. “(Friday) we invite you to leave your cars parked and ride GET for free, all day, to avoid additional air pollution and to protect your health.”