

## **Parts of Tuolumne River park are thickets of wildfire fuel. Chainsaws get to work**

By John Holland

Modesto Bee, Monday, Oct. 19, 2020

A bicyclist rides near a controlled burn that is part of an effort to reduce wildfire fuels in Tuolumne River Regional Park in October 2020. John Holland

Modesto firefighters have taken up chainsaws and other tools to reduce wildfire fuel in Tuolumne River Regional Park.

The work is concentrated in a lightly visited zone between Mitchell Road and the east end of Mary E. Grogan Grove. Crews have been pruning oaks and other native trees, while removing non-natives, such as tree of heaven, that are especially flammable.

The project also involves controlled burning in spots to mimic the frequent fires that used to clear the undergrowth. Experts say a century-plus of suppressing these flames has contributed to the massive blazes in California and elsewhere. The Tuolumne watershed in the central Sierra Nevada been especially hard hit.

“It’s going to make the park healthier, and it’s going to make it safer for our firefighters and the community,” Fire Chief Alan Ernst said in a Facebook video.

### **Beware of smoldering debris**

The work is largely finished, but visitors should watch out for burned tree limbs that continued to smolder as of Saturday afternoon.

The regional park is made up of several sites along a seven-mile stretch of the Tuolumne from Mitchell to Carpenter Road. The fuel reduction is in and near the Legion Park section, where people enjoy hiking, picnics, rowboats and other low-key fun.

Agencies have contended over the years with fires from homeless camps and other sources in the park. So far in 2020, they have required 140 hours of response time by the Modesto and Ceres departments and the Stanislaus Consolidated Fire Protection District. Each requires an average four hours.

### **Keeping future blazes on the ground**

Ernst said the project has reduced the “ladder fuels” that can turn a grass fire into one that consumes brush and trees. This could reduce the average response time on future calls to 30 to 40 minutes.

The work also will protect homes in the airport neighborhood of Modesto and in north Ceres.

The department did the controlled burning under a permit from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. That agency regulates sources of smoke but could do little about the pall cast by record wildfires in California this year.

## **Creek Fire update, Oct. 18: Dry winds fueling fire as firefighters scout for flare-ups**

By Robert Kuwada

Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and other papers, Sunday, Oct. 18, 2020

The Creek Fire grew to 348,085 acres burned overnight with 60% containment.

Hot and dry conditions weather, coupled with light breezes, fueled the blaze and complicated firefighting efforts, fire officials said Sunday. A high pressure system is expected to keep conditions hot and dry through the end of the week.

Smoke also is expected to increase throughout the area, affecting visibility and air quality.

In the South Zone, there was little fire activity overnight. The active fire line remains confined to the northeastern area of the wildfire, and a precautionary structure defense plan has been put in place for Thomas Edison Lake. That potentially will include firing operations on Sunday evening to increase the defensible space around structures.

Fire crews also are working to secure the fire line around the Florence Lake area and patrol and mop up fire from Florence Lake to the North/South Zone break near Redinger Lake.

In the North Zone, the priority for fire crews on Sunday is to secure and improve the line around Red Top and from Upper Chiquito to the San Joaquin River.

The fire at the far north end has burned into the granite outcrops of the high country and continues to creep and burn available fuels, but forward progress has been stopped. Due to access issues and safety concerns, the area will be monitored by air.

As of late Saturday, a total of 346,477 acres had burned after growing by 1,608 acres overnight.

The cause of the Creek Fire, which started Sept. 4, remains under investigation. It has destroyed 983 structures and damaged 71 in Fresno and Madera counties, and 119 remain threatened.

The estimated date of full containment remains Oct. 31.

Smoke from the Creek Fire was expected to be heaviest in the Mammoth Lakes area on Sunday, reaching hazardous levels. Areas south and west of the fire would have air quality ranging from unhealthy for sensitive groups to unhealthy from Ponderosa Basin to Millerton.

The highest levels are expected in locations nearest the fire, including North Fork.

### **SQF Complex Fire update**

The SQF Complex Fire burning in Tulare County remained at 72% containment. A total of 69,297 acres have burned after increasing by 1,202 acres overnight.

The county has been added to the Federal Major Disaster Declaration for Wildfires in California, which provides individual assistance programs and resources for those impacted by the wildfire, which started Aug. 19 and was started by lightning.

Fire officials said the wildfire would continue to grow to the north in actively burning areas on Sunday in areas of significant tree mortality. Fuel models vary with elevation, and some have limited fire history – the 2002 McNally Fire burn scar, 2017 Pier Fire burn scar, and 2017 Schaefer Fire burn scar all contain mixtures of grasses and brush that contribute to the spread of the fire.

Mandatory evacuation orders remain for Alpine Village, Cedar Slope, Pyles Boys Camp, Redwood Drive, and Sequoia Crest.

Voluntary evacuation warnings are in effect for Camp Nelson, Pier Point, Ponderosa, Doyle Springs, Blue Ridge Drive between Balch Park Road and the Gate at Grouse Valley, Bear Creek Road from Rancheria Fire Control Road to the address of 44853 Bear Creek Road, Mineral King, Silver City and Balch Park Road from the intersection of Blue Ridge Drive to Battle Mountain Monument.

### **Creek Fire update, Oct. 17: Blaze grows to 346,477 acres; Lake Edison car retrieval set**

By Jim Guy

Fresno Bee, Modesto Bee and other papers, Saturday, Oct. 17, 2020

The Creek Fire, which has destroyed 856 structures and burned thousands of trees in the Sierra and Inyo national forests, remained 60% contained Saturday night across a burn zone totaling 346,477 acres, according to Cal Fire.

Sierra National Forest remains closed until at least Nov. 1.

President Donald Trump, reversing an earlier decision from federal officials, released millions of dollars in relief for fire-ravaged California to help battle statewide blazes, including the Creek Fire and the SQF Fire in Tulare County.

Air quality continues to be degraded by the statewide blazes and was listed as unhealthy for sensitive groups in Fresno, Madera, and Tulare Counties.

### **Saturday night Creek Fire update**

Both the acreage and containment totals remained unchanged from Saturday morning's briefing.

There have been 26 minor injuries involving firefighters since the blaze broke out in early September. Total personnel committed to the fire, the largest single wildfire in California history and fifth biggest when including multiple fires that merged into single complex blazes, stands at 952.

In the South Zone, Cal Fire reported, flames made very little progress thanks in part to natural granite features in the areas of Junction Bluffs, Cassidy Meadows and Pincushion Peak. A precautionary structure defense plan is in place for Lake Edison.

Visit the Sierra National Forest Facebook page for the full Saturday night report.

### **Vehicle retrieval at Florence, Edison lakes**

There are still vehicles left behind when the fire broke out, with some collected Saturday from Florence Lake and more set to be retrieved Sunday at Lake Edison.

More information is available at the Fresno County Sheriff's website at [www.fresnosheriff.org](http://www.fresnosheriff.org).

### **Update on Dolan Fire**

Along the Central Coast, firefighters are close to final containment on the Dolan Fire, which has raged near Big Sur for nearly two months.

A team of New York city firefighters, which is managing the blaze, said it expected 100% containment as early as today, as weather conditions improved. They warned poor humidity overnight would continue to expose hot spots, which are being monitored.

The blaze has charred 124,924 acres and destroyed 19 structures and a wildlife sanctuary for endangered California condors. It was allegedly started Aug. 17 by Ivan Geronimo Gomez, a 30-year-old Fresno man, who was arrested a day later. He remains in Monterey County Jail.

## **Do you want to improve Fresno streets and transit system? This agency wants your ideas**

By Danielle Bergstrom

Fresno Bee, Saturday, Oct. 17, 2020

Tired of dangerous intersections, missing sidewalks and potholes? Want faster bus service and safer bike routes?

Then share your ideas in this survey by Thursday, Oct. 22. There are also Spanish and Punjabi versions of the form.

Fresno County transportation officials are gearing up to ask voters to approve another extension of Measure C — the half-cent sales tax that funds most local transportation projects. This survey will help prioritize what ultimately may be funded.

But beware — there's a long, murky road between the projects that get submitted and those that actually get built, even if voters approve the next extension of Measure C. A new, powerful committee is being formed by planners at Fresno County's two regional transportation agencies to ultimately select which types of projects could get funded in the upcoming ballot measure.

### **Here's the process**

Every four years, regional transportation planners update what's called a regional transportation plan, or RTP — essentially, a blueprint for how to spend the hundreds of millions of dollars of federal, state and local gas tax, sales tax and other funding set aside for Fresno County.

The project ideas that community members send in will be considered for inclusion in that plan.

This blueprint has a lot of influence on the location of future housing, stores, offices, schools and medical offices. Previous plans have included a significant focus on the expansion of freeways 41, 180 and 168 which made possible the development of new suburbs on the fringes of Clovis and Fresno.

([Check out this map](#) to find out where projects are located in the 2018 version of the regional transportation plan, currently being updated.)

Transportation officials will share the survey results with city and county officials to identify how they fit into local land-use plans and how easy they are to implement, according to Brenda Veenendaal, public information officer with the Fresno Council of Governments.

The number of projects chosen will depend on the amount of funding available.

In December, city and county officials will return their priority projects list to the Fresno Council of Governments for inclusion in the RTP.

These projects are then evaluated by transportation planners, based on their ability to support the region's projected growth, reduce traffic congestion, improve air quality, support the region's economy and improve safety, among other issues.

After the passage of SB 375 in 2008, there's been more focus on making sure local transportation projects help Fresno County reduce carbon emissions to support the state's climate goals. More than half of Fresno County's emissions come from cars and trucks. Urban planning and climate experts frequently point toward strategies that encourage more people to use public transit, walk or bike as the best way to reduce local carbon emissions.

The Fresno Council of Governments' Policy Board — composed of elected officials from each of the 15 incorporated cities of Fresno County and one representative from the Board of Supervisors — makes the final decision on which projects are included in the regional transportation plan. A decision on the final plan — a blueprint for all future funding — is expected by June 2022.

### **Committee forming to choose projects**

Getting a project included in the regional transportation plan is no guarantee it will get built. "The regional transportation plan is a menu of projects to choose from," said Mike Leonardo, executive director for the Fresno County Transportation Authority, whose agency oversees funds raised through Measure C.

Leonardo's agency is in the process of selecting representatives to serve on an executive committee responsible for choosing which projects to fund in the next ballot measure. Although not finalized yet, this powerful committee will be responsible for allocating hundreds of millions of dollars of local taxes. Some members have been contacted, but the pandemic has slowed down the process of finalizing a list, Leonardo said.

Committee members are expected to represent a diversity of interests: business, agriculture, public health, cities and community-based organizations.

A more technical working group is being formed to advise the executive committee through the ballot measure formation process.

### **Measure C battle expected**

In 2006, when the last Measure C extension was on the ballot, voters approved a sales tax increase which was split between freeway and road expansions, local streets and sidewalk repairs, and transit — along with other projects aimed at improving air quality, including the failed rail consolidation effort.

Even though the current sales tax doesn't expire until 2027, going forward with a new ballot measure for November 2022 gives proponents multiple opportunities to get voter approval prior to expiration, should the effort fail next year. The measure will require approval from two-thirds of voters, a difficult threshold to meet.

Measure C has raised \$771 million in local tax dollars since 2006. The first version of Measure C was approved by Fresno County voters in 1986.

The upcoming ballot measure process is expected to be contentious, with developers and some business interests pushing for freeway and road expansion, but community organizations pushing for more emphasis on fixing and maintaining local roads, sidewalks and improving transit with a focus on prioritizing working-class communities of color.

“Any effort to reauthorize Measure C must be driven by community residents through a participatory process,” said Veronica Garibay, co-director of Fresno-based Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability. “We need to address racial justice, climate change and the mobility needs of disadvantaged communities with strong resident oversight.”

## **Following push from Calif. Republicans, Trump reverses FEMA rejection of wildfire aid**

By Alex Tavlian

The Sun, Friday, Oct. 16, 2020

President Donald Trump is reversing course on Federal aid for clean-up efforts of California’s wildfires, two days after officials with the Federal Emergency Management Agency denied a request from Gov. Gavin Newsom, sources told The Sun.

The reversal from Trump comes after a furious 24-hour lobbying push by Republican members of California’s House Delegation, including Reps. Kevin McCarthy (R-Bakersfield) and Devin Nunes (R-Tulare).

At the conclusion of September, Newsom requested individual and public assistance from FEMA for clean-up efforts on the millions of acres of California lands.

In a letter issued Wednesday, FEMA Administrator Pete Gaynor argued California and local agencies had sufficient resources to manage clean-up efforts.

State and local leaders announced early Friday they were preparing an appeal of the rejection of aid.

The lack of Federal assistance would have posed considerable problems for Valley waterways.

Fire-singed debris and other remnants from the wildfires are likely to be swept into local watershed should rain arrive in the Sierra foothills.

## **Update: Trump administration reverses course, approves California wildfire aid** **The White House had said California's request for a presidential major disaster declaration was rejected because it was 'not supported by the relevant data.'**

Visalia Times-Delta, Friday, Oct. 16, 2020

The Trump administration will approve California’s request for a disaster declaration for six destructive wildfires after initially denying federal aid for blazes that burned hundreds of thousands of acres across the state.

One of the fires listed is the massive Creek Fire, the largest wildfire in the state's history.

On Friday afternoon, Rep. Tom McClintock (R-Sacramento) Tweeted that President Trump had reversed the earlier FEMA decision.

The White House said California's request for a presidential major disaster declaration was initially rejected because it was "not supported by the relevant data," Trump Administration deputy press secretary Judd Deere wrote in a statement.

"This summer, President Trump quickly approved wildfire relief for the State of California that was supported by damage estimates. In fact, this week the President made additional disaster assistance available to California by authorizing an increase in the level of Federal funding to 100% for debris removal and emergency protective measures undertaken as a result of the wildfires, beginning August 14, 2020, and continuing," Deere said.

"The more recent and separate California submission was not supported by the relevant data that States must provide for approval and the President concurred with the FEMA Administrator's recommendation," the statement read.

McClintock did not share the reasoning behind the reversal of the FEMA decision, but did say a "Presidential Disaster Declaration is imminent and help is on the way."

Shortly after McClintock's Tweet, California Gov. Gavin Newsom released a statement confirming the information.

"Just got off the phone with President Trump who has approved our Major Disaster Declaration request. Grateful for his quick response," Newsom said in a statement Friday.

The denial and then apparent reversal of the decision came after Newsom requested financial aid from the federal government in a Sept. 28 letter to the Trump administration detailing the financial impact of the wildfires.

Writing that damage estimates exceeded \$229 million, Newsom wrote that "federal assistance is critical to support physical and economic recovery of California and its communities."

On Friday, California State Senator Andreas Borgeas (R-Fresno) sent a letter to Trump and FEMA asking for a reconsideration of the denial.

Borgeas wrote "...significant damage to roads, and access to facilities are blocked by thousands of hazardous trees and debris. There was also significant damage to the wastewater treatment facility that could take months to repair, further delaying residents' ability to return to their homes...."

On Thursday, Assemblyman Jim Patterson (R-Fresno) wrote a letter to the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES).

The letter, in part, stated:

"There were more than 927 structures burned in the Creek Fire, which is the largest single wildfire (noncomplex fire) in California history. A large number of my constituents living in the area had little or no insurance." Cleanup efforts need to start soon, ahead of seasonal snow and rain. The cost of hiring a contractor for waste removal can run upwards of \$70,000, according to Patterson.

"Those who are underinsured may only have part of the cleanup covered," he wrote in the letter. "Those without insurance would be responsible for the entire cost."

In the meantime, the cleanup will be funded by the Recovery CA Disaster Assistance Act, Patterson said. The assemblyman has been in contact with the Central Valley congressional delegation and is "working hard to overturn the FEMA denial."

"While I understand the preference of Cal OES to wait for FEMA funds before beginning this work, there is no more time to waste," he wrote in his letter. "Rain and snow are imminent, as are the resulting mudslides into our watersheds. We must act now to prevent harmful hazardous waste and bulk asbestos from threatening public health and the environment."

Fires in the aid request include:

- The Creek Fire, the largest wildfire in the state's history, which has burned 341,722 acres across Fresno and Madera counties
- The Bobcat Fire in Los Angeles County that burned 115,796 acres
- The gender reveal party-caused El Dorado Fire in San Bernardino County
- The Valley Fire in San Diego County
- The Oak Fire in Mendocino County
- The Slater Fire in Siskiyou County

In addition, Tulare County was added to the Federal Major Disaster Declaration for Wildfires due to the SQF Complex. The fire continues to burn in the Sequoia National Forest and Golden Trout Wilderness and has destroyed over 200 structures in the county.

More than 8,500 wildfires have burned more than 4.1 million acres across California since the beginning of this fire season, Cal Fire said in a press release on Thursday.

More than 9,200 structures have been destroyed and 31 people have been killed in those wildfires.