

Five months and 174,000 acres later, SQF Complex achieves 100% containment

By Joshua Yeager

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The SQF Complex is 100% contained five months after the wildfire first exploded across the Sequoia National Forest, forcing thousand of Tulare County mountain residents to evacuate in the busy summer season.

Forest officials announced late Wednesday that the blaze had reached full containment, though pockets of smoke are expected to remain until the area sees heavy snowfall.

Winter conditions are expected to extinguish any lingering hot spots deep within the fire's perimeter, though snow and rain bring new safety concerns in the form of flash floods that could threaten downslope communities, such as Camp Nelson.

The SQF Complex, which comprised the Castle and Shotgun fires, is both the largest and most damaging fire event in Tulare County history. A total of 174,178 acres burned since lightning sparked the fires on Aug. 19. The record blaze consumed 242 structures, causing county leaders to declare a state of emergency.

No deaths or major injuries were reported.

The fire was so massive that it attracted international aid in the form of 100 firefighters from Mexico. The SQF Complex saw a total of eight emergency management teams since August.

Those teams left the area after the first storm of the season reduced the fire's intensity in November, with firefighters transitioning to a "monitor and patrol" approach.

The Sequoia National Forest will remain closed through at least Jan. 31, officials announced.

"Once the area receives enough precipitation to fully extinguish remaining hot spots, including duff burning around tree trunks and deep inside stump holes and roots, the Forest Service hopes to re-open the area to the public," District Ranger Eric LaPrice said in a statement. "We are all hoping for more rain and snow to assist us in this effort. In the meantime, thank you for your patience while we keep the area closed to protect the public."

Now that the fire is contained, LaPrice said much work remains to be done to remove debris and return the forest to pre-fire conditions. Heavy equipment is expected to return to the Tulare County mountains in the spring to continue those efforts.

Travelers along Highway 190 are urged to exercise caution and expect delays at roadblocks where work is ongoing in the meantime.