

Lake Tahoe threatened by massive fire, more ordered to flee

By Noah Berer – Associated Press

In the Sacramento Bee and Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Aug. 30, 2021

Fire officials ordered more evacuations near Lake Tahoe and told other residents to be ready to leave as a destructive fire roared through forests southwest of the alpine lake that straddles the California-Nevada state line.

Several communities south of the lake were abruptly ordered to evacuate Sunday afternoon and residents on the southern and southwestern shores of the lake were warned to be ready to evacuate if ordered.

The community of Meyers, south of the small tourist city of South Lake Tahoe, was among those evacuated. Many people had apparently left earlier, likely because of the terrible smoke that has created horrendous air quality, said fire spokesman Keith Wade, who said he watched people leave.

The fire destroyed multiple residences Sunday along Highway 50, one of the main routes to the south end of the lake. The fire also roared through the Sierra-at-Tahoe ski resort, destroying secondary buildings but leaving the main buildings at the base intact.

“Today’s been a rough day and there’s no bones about it,” Jeff Marsoleis, forest supervisor for El Dorado National Forest, said Sunday evening. A few days ago, he had thought crews could halt the Caldor Fire’s eastern progress, but “today it let loose.”

Flames churned through mountains just a few miles southwest of the Tahoe Basin, where thick smoke sent tourists packing at a time when summer vacations would usually be in full swing ahead of the Labor Day weekend.

“To put it in perspective, we’ve been seeing about a half-mile of movement on the fire’s perimeter each day for the last couple of weeks, and today, this has already moved at 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) on us, with no sign that it’s starting to slow down,” said Cal Fire Division Chief Erich Schwab.

Some areas of the Northern California terrain are so rugged that crews had to carry fire hoses by hand from Highway 50 as they sought to douse spot fires caused by erratic winds.

The forecast did not offer optimism: triple-digit temperatures were possible and the extreme heat was expected to last several days. A red flag warning for critical fire conditions was issued for Monday and Tuesday across the Northern Sierra.

The blaze that broke out August 14 was 19% contained after burning nearly 245 square miles (635 square kilometers) — an area larger than Chicago. More than 600 structures have been destroyed and at least 18,000 more were under threat.

The Caldor Fire has proved so difficult to fight that fire managers pushed back the projected date for full containment from early this week to Sept. 8. But even that estimate was tenuous.

In Southern California, a section Interstate 15 was closed Sunday afternoon after winds pushed a new blaze, dubbed the Railroad Fire, across lanes in the Cajon Pass northeast of Los Angeles.

Further south, evacuation orders and warnings were still in place for remote communities after a wildfire broke out and spread quickly through the Cleveland National Forest on Saturday. A firefighter received minor injuries and two structures were destroyed in the 2.3-square-mile (5.9-square-kilometer) Chaparral Fire burning along the border of San Diego and Riverside counties, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. It was 10% contained Sunday.

Meanwhile, California’s Dixie Fire, the second-largest in state history at 1,193 square miles (3,089 square kilometers) was 48% contained in the Sierra-Cascades region about 65 miles (105 kilometers) north of the Caldor Fire. Nearly 700 homes were among almost 1,300 buildings that have been destroyed since the fire began in early July.

Containment increased to 22% on the 12-day-old French Fire, which covered more than 38 square miles (98 square kilometers) in the southern Sierra Nevada. Crews protected forest homes on the west side of Lake Isabella, a popular recreation area northeast of Bakersfield.

More than a dozen large fires are being fought by more than 15,200 firefighters across California. Flames have destroyed around 2,000 structures and forced thousands to evacuate this year while blanketing large swaths of the West in unhealthy smoke.

The California fires are among nearly 90 large blazes in the U.S. Many are in the West, burning trees and brush desiccated by drought. Climate change has made the region warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.

The Department of Defense is sending 200 U.S. Army soldiers from Washington state and equipment including eight U.S. Air Force C-130 aircraft to help firefighters in Northern California, the U.S. Army North said in a statement Saturday. The C-130s have been converted to air tankers that can dump thousands of gallons of water on the flames.

Thousands of Lake Tahoe residents ordered to evacuate as Caldor Fire runs over Echo Summit

By Jill Tucker, J.D. Morris

San Francisco Chronicle, Monday, August 30, 2021

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE — The Caldor Fire roared through drought-dried timber, burning another 10,000 acres overnight Sunday as it headed toward Lake Tahoe, sending residents fleeing into Nevada as flames crested the summit of the Sierra.

A large part of South Lake Tahoe and surrounding areas was ordered to evacuate Monday morning, including the Heavenly Ski Resort, Tahoe Keys, Emerald Bay and all areas west into Desolation Wilderness and over Echo Summit.

The wildfire, which reached 177,260 acres, has destroyed hundreds of homes in El Dorado County and threatened 21,000 more as it headed east toward the Tahoe Basin and south toward the Amador County line near Kirkwood.

On Sunday, the fire pushed forward 8 1/2 miles, officials said, calling that a “wake-up call” for what was in store Monday.

“The firefighting conditions, the fuels, are historic,” said Cal Fire Incident Commander Jeff Veik, in a staff briefing. “We will put this fire out. It’s not going to be today.”

While officials hoped that the blaze could be stopped before it reached Echo Summit, winds continued pushing the flames forward, with embers sparking spot fires well in front of the main blaze.

Weather conditions were expected to worsen, with a Red Flag warning in effect to Tuesday night, with winds pushing the fire up the slope and embers lighting spot fires up to a mile ahead of the main blaze.

At one point Sunday, a spot fire went halfway up the side of a granite cliff and found the only fuel available to burn, said Cal Fire’s Steven Volmer, a fire behavior specialist.

Containment of the Caldor Fire was measured at 14%, backtracking from 19% over the weekend given the out-of-control growth on the northeast and southern edges. Three firefighters and two civilians have suffered injuries since the fire started two weeks ago near Grizzly Flats.

Officials issued an evacuation warning for all of South Lake Tahoe on Sunday night, advising residents to be ready to leave their homes on short notice if the fire continues its advance.

Just before 10 a.m., mandatory evacuations were in place for Meyers and several parts of South Lake Tahoe, including the area below Fallen Leaf Lake down to the water’s edge at Emerald Bay and Pope Beach.

At the Tahoe Verde mobile home park on the southwest side of South Lake Tahoe, Erick Hurtado, 17, and his father Hugo Hernandez, 34, were preparing to evacuate Monday morning. Hurtado, who lives in the park with his mother and stepfather, knew they would have to go soon.

Standing in front of his home holding his white 1-year-old chihuahua, Bun Bun, Hurtado said he was staying level-headed as they were ordered to flee.

"It's just one of those things that, if you stay calm, it helps everyone and you can get a plan together," Hurtado said, adding his family planned to find safety in Nevada.

Meanwhile, Christina Ingram was in Fallon, Nev., trying to get a hold of her grandfather, whom she believed had evacuated to the park from his home in Meyers just south of the city.

Speaking by phone, she became emotional thinking of the threat that the Caldor Fire poses to her grandfather's home — and to the broader Tahoe region.

"That's the last thing I would want, is for his house to go," Ingram said. "It's not just this fire. It's been fire after fire. It feels like they can't get a break."

Meanwhile, the unincorporated community of Meyers, on the edge of South Lake Tahoe, was a smoky ghost town Monday after a mandatory evacuation was issued a day earlier. Every business, including the Holiday Market and Meek's Lumber and Hardware, was shuttered, with only a few empty cars sitting in parking lots. Only the faintest of treetops on the ridge nearby poked through the smoke along Highway 50.

While the town of Strawberry was largely spared over the weekend, homes and cabins along the highway burned as firefighters focused on the fire line farther up the mountain. The Sierra-at-Tahoe ski resort appeared to have been largely spared, with the resort's lodges and other buildings mostly intact, with snow-blowing machines aiming water at them through the night.

In nearby Stateline, Nev., casinos were shrouded in wildfire smoke, obscuring the area's natural surroundings as a gloomy red sun rose over Lake Tahoe Monday morning. Cars streamed steadily out of town on Highway 50 as residents left South Lake Tahoe just across the California border.

Nearby, Barton Hospital in South Lake Tahoe began evacuating patients to other facilities early Monday morning, ahead of the mandatory orders that followed hours later, leaving only the emergency room open, officials announced on social media.

Caldor Fire's 'extreme rates of spread' prompt evacuation warning for all of South Lake Tahoe

By J.D. Morris, Megan Cassidy, Sarah Ravani
San Francisco Chronicle, Monday, August 30, 2021

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE — All residents on the California side of Lake Tahoe's south shore were warned Sunday night to be ready to leave their homes in the face of the monstrous Caldor Fire as crews fought to beat back the blaze and new mandatory evacuation orders were issued outside the city of South Lake Tahoe.

The entire Desolation Wilderness was ordered evacuated, and Sunday night's warning included all areas surrounding the south side of Lake Tahoe up to the Nevada border, including the city of South Lake Tahoe. Some areas south of the city were previously ordered to evacuate.

Barton Memorial Hospital in South Lake Tahoe was evacuating all of its patients Sunday evening.

The 2-week-old blaze has frequently resisted all efforts to control it. On Sunday, a combination of critically dry vegetation and strong winds helped it cast flames as far as 1 mile ahead at times, officials said.

The Caldor Fire was 13% contained as of Sunday evening, down from 19% that morning. The 168,387-acre fire has destroyed 472 homes, and more than 21,000 structures were threatened.

Firefighters will face more punishing conditions early this week. The National Weather Service issued a red flag warning for extreme fire danger from 11 a.m. Monday to 11 p.m. Tuesday, warning of winds moving as fast as 35 mph, with anticipated low humidity.

Though the fire had not entered the Tahoe Basin as of Sunday evening, its rapid advance caused authorities on Sunday afternoon to order some near South Lake Tahoe, those living in the Meyers and Christmas Valley communities, south of the Lake Tahoe Airport, to evacuate their homes.

The Red Cross opened a shelter for evacuees at Douglas County Community and Senior Center in Gardnerville, to the east of Lake Tahoe in Nevada.

The fire burned Sunday with “a lot of extreme rates of spread,” also leading to new evacuations in neighboring Alpine and Amador counties, said Eric Schwab, Cal Fire operations section chief.

Bulldozers circled homes on both sides of Highway 50 as firefighters defended the community of Strawberry on Sunday after the northernmost tip of the blaze managed to cross Strawberry Creek the previous day, said Tim Ernst, operations section chief for Cal Fire.

On the west side of the fire, south of Pollock Pines and east of Somerset, crews struggled to contain the blaze in the Butte Creek area, Schwab said.

Overall, firefighters faced extreme and dynamic fire weather with spot fires burning outside of existing containment lines Sunday. That threat was a key concern, prompting the digging of backup lines for reinforcement, Cal Fire said.

The first priority for fire crews was to evacuate people quickly and defend properties from destruction, Schwab said.

Sunday was a “challenging and difficult day,” said Dusty Martin, Cal Fire unified incident commander.

Isaac Lake, Cal Fire division chief, said Sunday was the hottest and driest day since the Caldor Fire ignited two weeks ago. The increasing winds, along with rising temperatures signaled a tough fight ahead, officials said. Monday highs were forecast in the 90s across most lower elevations and 80s for valleys near the Sierra.

“Those are going to be some hurdles for us,” Lake said.

As of Sunday, more than 25,000 people were evacuated in El Dorado County, according to Cal Fire.

Air quality readings around the south shore of Lake Tahoe, which is east of where the fire is burning, exceeded 200 in many places, with some spots topping 300. Similarly polluted levels hovered over Placerville and other communities west of the fire. Any score beyond 100 is considered unhealthy.

In Placerville on Sunday, the activist groups Rural Resistance Placerville and Black Lives Matter El Dorado County were distributing 1,200 N95 respirator masks from Mask Oakland, a group that has provided masks to Bay Area residents during past fires.

Organizer Ali Jones estimated she had handed out hundreds to local farmworkers, fire evacuees and others in downtown Placerville, and 100 masks to a group helping homeless people.

Smoke drifting south from the Northern California fires prompted a continued Spare the Air alert for the Bay Area, warning of unhealthy air quality and banning wood burning.

The gray blanket of smoke over Tahoe’s south shore improved a little on Sunday so the lake’s waters returned to their classic blue color at El Dorado Beach, but skies grew darker in the late afternoon. Orange and dark gray smoke billowed across the sky from the south, casting the sun through a red filter and making Caldor’s advance clear.

In South Lake Tahoe, Hillary Lawson and Paul Jenkins were hunkered down in their home Sunday near the Tahoe Keys, trying to avoid the smoke.

The two work at local hospitals and were married Aug. 14 near Alpine Meadows in front of a rock-topped mountainside surrounded by green trees — not realizing as they took their vows that the Caldor Fire had started the very same day, near Grizzly Flats.

They returned from their honeymoon last week, and instead of spending time in their beloved outdoor environment hiking and walking their two American Labradors, “We’ve walked the dogs once in the last week,” said Lawson, sitting at her kitchen table.

Hoping they could remain at home, the couple said they would leave if their neighborhood falls under an evacuation order.

"It's a really important thing right now," Jones said. "Local government agencies aren't really supplying masks to the public in huge waves like this."

On another street nearby, Noel Manalo stood atop his roof early Sunday evening sweeping up pine needles and anything else that could ignite should Caldor embers reach the area. Though his neighborhood was not among those ordered evacuated yet, Manalo, who has lived in the area since 1974, said he wanted to be ready.

"I feel anxious," he said. "But what are you gonna do?"

With firefighters stationed near the Sierra at Tahoe ski resort prepared to defend structures, John Rice, manager of the resort, worried about what he'd find in the morning. Cal Fire crews directed him to leave the resort for safety in the afternoon and he had received no word hours later as to whether his home or the resort had been damaged. "We will see when the sun comes up. I have to find out if I have a house and a ski resort," Rice said Sunday night.

Meanwhile the Dixie Fire east of Chico — the second largest blaze in state history — held steady at 48% containment, though the weather forecast suggested conditions could quickly turn menacing.

Meteorologists expected low humidity and winds up to 25 mph to push flames into steep terrains in the western area of the wildfire, with crews attempting to hold lines near Janesville and Susanville. In the west zone more resources were brought in near the area of Genesee Valley to help slow western movement.

The 45-day-old blaze has destroyed 1,275 structures and chewed through 765,635 acres across five counties: Butte, Lassen, Plumas, Shasta and Tehama.

The fires are different this year - bigger and faster. What's fueling the change?

By Julie Johnson

San Francisco Chronicle, Monday, August 30, 2021

An unrelenting series of wildfires is burning across California this summer, charring nearly 1.7 million acres so far and putting this fire season on track to surpass last year's devastation, so far the worst on record.

Huge and fast-moving, these blazes have covered more than 2,600 square miles, mostly in the Sierra Nevada. Noxious smoke and ash has coated the sky, threatening to hamper people's immune defenses during the coronavirus pandemic.

The fire behavior has been supercharged, but there is some good news too. Fewer people have lost homes compared to last year. And no one has been killed.

Even so, this year's fires are growing to enormous sizes. Roads, highways and other fire breaks are failing to stop the flames. The nighttime hours, once a cooler, more humid refuge for firefighters to gain the upper hand, are instead producing aggressive, multi-mile burns.

A severe, two-year drought and an ever-warming climate have changed the rules.

Cal Fire Director Thom Porter said the state is in an "acute wildfire crisis." Weeks- and months-long firefighting campaigns have become routine, and the veteran fire chief has been stunned by the sheer magnitude and ferocity of the fires.

"I keep hoping that things are going to be different this year, but I keep finding that it's becoming normal to expect that each year will be worse than the last, or at least as bad," Porter told The Chronicle.

Six of California's seven largest fires have ignited within the last year. The Dixie Fire that started July 14 in Butte County and is burning through Plumas, Lassen, Shasta and Tehama counties has grown to nearly 764,000 acres and is the second largest fire in state history. Only last year's August Complex Fire surpasses it at more than 1 million acres.

A dozen major fires are responsible for most of the devastation so far this year — the 1.7 million acres is 2½ times the average number of acres burned during the same period over the last five years. It's on pace with 2020, when a historic dry lightning storm sent massively destructive fires racing across the

state. By this time last year, fire had destroyed just over 3,700 structures. So far, this year's toll is about 2,500.

Porter describes many of this year's blazes as "fuel-driven" fires, their growth fed by overgrown, drought-parched vegetation and terrain. Fires are expanding across massive tracts of unprecedentedly thirsty forest. And the "burn window" — the number of hours in a 24-hour cycle when fires are most active — has expanded deep into the night.

Cal Fire Assistant Chief Brian Newman, a fire behavior analyst working on the Dixie Fire, said he had to reprogram the state agency's computer model when the blaze exceeded long-held calculations for predicting fire movement. Burning in timber, the fire was behaving as if it were in shrublands, where fires move faster.

But this year, living trees and fallen conifers that would normally retain some moisture from winter snow and rain are parched, with little defense against any spark.

"They're drier than a 2-by-4 piece of lumber that you'd purchase at a hardware store which has been kiln dried and put out for sale," Newman said.

The combination of snow-starved alpine timberlands and a stormy cold front whipped up the Dixie Fire in the Plumas National Forest and sent it roaring into Greenville.

Winds have a devilish affect on wildfire, and big ones can generate their own weather systems. The stunning pyrocumulus columns rising upward of 20,000 feet above the Dixie Fire pulled burning branches up into a windy soup then spit the embers out ahead of the main fire.

The Dixie Fire was a 274,000-acre inferno that had been burning for 22 days when it roared into Greenville on Aug. 4. Newman said conditions stacked up for an impossible firefight to save the Gold Rush town. A cold front bringing strong winds from the southwest hit a low-slung but steep and rugged region of the Sierra near the Lake Almanor basin. From the tree tops down to the soil, the area was incredibly dry after a disappointing winter and hot summer.

The fire would double in size over three days, throwing embers — spotting, it's called — 6 miles ahead of the main fire. It shot forward 8 miles the first night, sending the blaze's southern flank into Greenville. The town was virtually wiped out.

The Caldor Fire that ignited Aug. 14 in El Dorado County has burned more than 156,500 acres, threatening the Lake Tahoe basin. The fire exploded in size on day three when a cold front hit mountains. The fire raced 3½ miles overnight into the morning of Aug. 17, sending residents of Grizzly Flats fleeing — an unusual nighttime run when fires normally die down.

The sheer ferocity of the fires have had people wondering: Why this, why now?

"The common question I normally get is: Do I think this is related to climate change," Newman said.

"Regardless of the why or how we got to this place, is recognizing we are here. The climate is warmer. It is drier. The result of that is longer fire seasons. The drier the fuels, fires are more resistant to control."

Recurrent drought is part of the West Coast climate, but winters have become drier in the last decade.

California's snowpack is a key metric for understanding the climate's impact on wildfires. In a typical year, the snowpack holds nearly one-third of the state's freshwater. When it melts in spring, it fills reservoirs and creeks and soaks into the earth.

While the snowpack was about 75% below average statewide for the 2020-2021 rain year, it was the lack of runoff that shocked state hydrologists. Water coming off the mountains dropped to about 20% of the forecast, an estimate that already took into account the low amount of snow, according to the California Department of Water Resources.

"The water never showed up in the reservoirs," said David Rizzardo, a top hydrologist with the water department. "It went two places as far as anyone can tell. It soaked into the ground because the ground was so thirsty. Or if you had heavy winds, it wiped it off the surface."

And it wasn't enough to replenish forests stressed by years of winters with below-average rain.

Rizzardo looks back over the last decade to understand the water situation: Drought years from 2012 to 2016 then 2020 to today. That 9-year outlook was punctured by only three years with normal or flooding amounts of rain.

“If you want to fill that bucket, you want to (replace) what you’re missing and maintain what you’ve got,” Rizzardo said.

That’s harder to do after years of depletion.

Consider Plumas County, which has been hit repeatedly by wildfires this year: Annual rainfall plummeted from 76.5 inches in 2016-17, a wet season, to just 20 inches last winter.

Lack of snowpack and lack of rain — that drier atmosphere will draw more moisture from trees and other vegetation, a natural balancing act that means even slight rises in temperatures can have dramatic impacts on the ground, said Michael Wara, director of the climate and energy policy program at Stanford University.

“The plants have to pump water into the atmosphere to stay alive,” Wara said. “The soil is having water sucked out of it from this super large straw called the atmosphere.”

That means embers that might have landed on shaded, moist forest floor are instead finding dense, dried-out vegetation ready to burn. Flames that might have stayed close to the forest floor are climbing up crowded, brushy forests into the tree canopy. Up there, fire is impossible to control and flames can rise to 300 feet.

“We’ve seen these massive runs through timber,” Porter said. “Almost every ember that hits the ground is igniting a new fire.”

And it’s not just the lack of moisture in the ground and plants.

Californians are living with the consequences of decisions made more than a century ago to tamp down forests’ natural cycles of fire and regeneration. That has left the state with vast tracts of wildland strangled with vegetation.

In 1993, Susie Kocher was starting her forestry career in Greenville, working for the U.S. Forest Service in Plumas National Forest. Even then, the forest was too crowded with trees and brush, a problem she discussed with her mentors.

She was on a salvage team removing dead and dying trees after a bark beetle blight and inquired about cutting down some healthy trees to improve the forest’s ecology. But at that time the rules for removing living trees were more burdensome. Plus, it could draw the ire of some environmentalists, she said.

Thinner forests with less undergrowth keep fires closer to the ground and burn at lower intensity, giving the bigger, older trees a chance to survive.

“We knew it was important; we knew we should be doing it,” said Kocher, who now teaches private property owners how to use fire to clear their forests in the central Sierra through the University of California’s Agriculture and Natural Resource programs. Fires are a natural feature of West Coast forests and were historically used by indigenous peoples to thin vegetation and manage the land. Those healthy fire cycles were interrupted on a massive scale with the displacement of native populations, said Sean Parks, a research ecologist who studies wildfires with the U.S. Forest Service’s Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute in Missoula, Mont.

Fire suppression continued with federal policies, which govern 57% of California forestland, to extinguish every fire.

“Just because a fire is big doesn’t mean it’s bad,” Parks said. “There are other ways to measure the effects of a fire. There’s the human toll — houses lost, people’s lives lost and the social effects. Then there are the ecological effects: How many trees are killed by the fire?”

Parks studies wildfire severity. His research has found that the amount of severe, tree-killing fire across the western United States is accelerating each year, driven by climate conditions that are drying out the fuels.

The incredible buildup of vegetation over the decades has combined with a drier climate to create unstoppable fires that would be easier to tamp down with less extreme weather conditions, Parks said.

Decimated forests could transform into shrub- and grasslands without significant intervention. The effects could be enormous, he said, removing the forested umbrella that protects entire ecosystems and critical watersheds for Californians, destroying crucial habitat for animals and beloved wildernesses that nurture the human spirit.

“Fire is inevitable and that’s something we need to recognize as we move forward,” Parks said. “If it’s inevitable, how do we want it to burn? That’s the choice.”

Porter has lamented that wildfires this year have already caused “generational destruction” within California’s timber basket, the northern Sierra Nevada region central to both commercial logging and the state’s plans for carbon sequestration.

The immediate impact on people has been less severe — fewer people forced to flee their homes and fewer homes lost compared to years past.

But those silver linings are no consolation for people who lost their homes and are also, in large part, due to chance. Most fires have ignited in remote areas, mostly federal forestlands. And it’s not yet September, when dry, inland wind storms bring some of California’s most dangerous fire weather.

“It feels like we’re coming back to the same situation over and over that is bigger than we are,” Porter said. “Mother Nature is in control, absolutely. And Mother Nature is having a hard time with these fires.”

California wildfires are climbing higher up mountains, putting more forest at risk of flames

By Kurtis Alexander

San Francisco Chronicle, Saturday, August 29, 2021

California’s wildfires are not only getting bigger, they’re moving higher, reaching once unthinkable heights.

The still-burning Dixie Fire was the first to push over the towering Sierra Nevada, igniting on the western side of the mountain range and catapulting to the valley floor on the east. The blaze, in the state’s remote north, also climbed into Lassen Volcanic National Park, where it was recently burning near 8,500 feet.

Other large fires have gotten even higher. Last year’s devastating Creek Fire and Sequoia Complex fires in the southern Sierra approached the dizzying elevation of 10,000 feet, a point at which trees and other burnable vegetation become exceedingly sparse.

These high-elevation burns, which are among the surge of big fires in California over the past few years, are the direct result of the warming climate, scientists say. And they’re exacerbating the wildfire crisis by charring tracts of land that were long considered too cool to burn. They’re also harder for firefighters to get to.

One study published this spring suggests that 11% more forest across the West, or 31,500 square miles, has become susceptible to burning over the past 3½ decades because of the expanded reach of flames. Nearly 2,400 square miles of this newly at-risk land are in the Sierra.

“We’re just opening up more opportunities for fires,” said John Abatzoglou, an associate professor of climatology at UC Merced and one of the authors of the recent paper. “We expect, moving forward, that high-elevation forests will just burn more regularly.”

Abatzoglou’s research, published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found that California’s wildfires are migrating upward even faster than those in most Western states.

During his study period of 1984 to 2017, the upper reach of fires in the Sierra rose more than 1,400 feet, compared with 827 feet across all mountain ranges in the West. The upper reach refers to the point at which only 10% of fires burn higher.

Several mechanisms are behind the climate-driven climb. Increasing temperatures are drying out mountain forests as well as reducing the amount of snow that keeps them moist. Some places are seeing

less precipitation. Also, many of these forests have become thicker with vegetation because of the heat, all of which is making higher elevations ripe for burning.

In addition, some spots are experiencing increases in lightning, meaning more ignitions, too.

“It’s the future that we face,” said Mark Schwartz, a plant ecologist and professor emeritus at UC Davis who also has researched the upward creep of wildfire. “There’s just more continuous fuels, which are allowing more fires to get to that high-elevation zone.”

The Dixie Fire, he said, is a perfect example. The fire started July 13 in the Feather River Canyon in Butte County at about 1,500 feet and has since climbed to above 8,000 feet. It’s become the second-largest blaze in California history.

While the Dixie Fire’s elevation may not be as high as some fires to the south, the cooler weather and moister conditions in the north make the ascent just as impressive, perhaps more so.

The upward migration of wildfire may play a role in fundamentally changing the landscape at higher elevations, too, and make these areas even more prone to burning in the future.

The trees that characterize the upper edge of Sierra forest at about 8,000 to 9,500 feet, such as white pine and mountain hemlock, are less adapted to fire and don’t do as well with rising temperatures. When and if they burn, they could be replaced by other pines and fir better suited to these newer conditions, trees that generally burn a lot more frequently.

“An ecological model of vegetation change would suggest you get upward movement of red fir and the capacity to have more fuels” for fire, Schwartz said.

Managing fire at higher elevations, including putting them out, comes with its own set of challenges. Long treks for fire crews and more restrictions on aircraft are just a couple.

“The further up you go, and in general, the more remote you are, the harder it is to supply firefighters to the line and support them logistically,” said Nic Elmquist, a fire behavior analyst for the U.S. Forest Service, which operates the nation’s largest wildland firefighting force. “When you get a year like this year, in all honesty, teams are already stretched to the limit.”

The Sierra’s high country has long been considered a place where firefighters haven’t had to worry much about suppressing wildfires. The fires often burned themselves out amid the cooler, moister conditions and lesser amounts of vegetation to feed flames. Fire crews sometimes steer blazes to high elevations for this reason.

But as the higher areas become more at risk of burning, fire managers have had to reassess their strategy.

“All bets are off,” said Ken Pimlott, a professional forester and former director of Cal Fire, the state’s firefighting agency. “High-elevation fires change the dynamic. You can’t count on the Sierra crest as a natural barrier anymore.”

Pimlott was among many who were critical of the Forest Service this summer for not being more aggressive about putting out the Tamarack Fire, south of Lake Tahoe. The agency sent firefighters to the blaze six days after it started on July 4, during which time it went from a small fire on a remote mountain ridge at about 7,500 feet to a giant inferno burning to 9,000 feet and threatening the Alpine County community of Markleeville.

Forest Service officials said with limited staffing, they had no choice but to prioritize more threatening burns. The Tamarack Fire, which ignited with a lightning strike in a spot with little vegetation, was one that might have burned itself out in the high country, if not for the uptick in wind and heat that ensued.

“It’s hard in California to find locations anymore where a fire is not going to be influenced by these conditions,” Pimlott said. “Maybe historically that would have been the approach, but you can’t do that now.”

The recent study on wildfire migration found that the amount of Western lands that burned above 8,200 feet from 2001 to 2017 was more than triple what burned from 1984 to 2000. In the Sierra, it was seven

times more. While all elevations have experienced more flames, these higher areas recorded the largest increase.

Abatzoglou, the study's author, said that if his research had not ended in 2017 and continued through last year's big and brutal wildfires, the spike in high-elevation blazes would be even more profound.

The same may prove to be true with this year's young, but very active, fire season.

'It's suffocating': Valley residents cope with smoky air due to California wildfires Experts are urging people to stay indoors if possible to reduce exposure to harmful particles in the smoke.

By Linda Ha

ABC 30 News, Sunday, Aug. 29, 2021

FRESNO, Calif. (KFSN) -- Bad air quality is no stranger to Pat Yen, who grew up in the Central Valley.

On Saturday, his family spent time by the water at Woodward Park.

He said the memories they make are worth being outdoors for a little while.

"That's why I brought my kids over here, to feed the ducks, and just enjoy," he said.

From the Dixie and Caldor Fires in northern California to the French and Walker Fires in Tulare County and Kern County, the Central Valley is seeing smoke impacts in many communities.

"It's terrible. Everywhere you go, there's smoke outside. It's sometimes suffocating," said Fresno resident Amandeep Singh.

Added Jasmeen Mann, another Fresno resident: "Our world has gotten a lot more gray."

The air quality was so bad in parts of the Valley on Friday that the high school football game between San Joaquin and Hanford was canceled at halftime.

It also prompted an air quality alert, urging people to stay indoors if possible to reduce exposure to harmful particles in the smoke.

"You inhale it with every breath, you take it into your lungs and then it ends up in your bloodstream, and it can have a whole host of adverse impacts," said Heather Heinks with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Health experts say those with asthma, young children and older people, are especially vulnerable to the pollutants.

For those going outside, properly used masks can help.

"We stress that you check with your healthcare provider. Sometimes N95 masks are useful, but not effective if you've got facial hair or already have respiratory conditions," said Heinks.

French Fire continues burning Sunday; containment grows to 26 percent

The Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Aug. 29, 2021

The French Fire continued burning Sunday, and is reported to have burned some 24,920 acres since it started Aug. 18 west of Lake Isabella.

The fire is 26 percent contained, fire officials reported Sunday evening, and 1,614 personnel are assigned to the fire. It has been determined to have been human-caused, fire officials reported.

"The fire is exhibiting extreme fire behavior due to dry fuel conditions, gusty winds and long-range spot fires," according to a U.S. Forest Service news release.

The fire is being managed by California Interagency Incident Management Team 12, coordinating closely with the Bureau of Land Management, Sequoia National Forest, and Kern County Fire Department in Unified Command.

Go to this Kern County Fire Department site for an interactive evacuation zone map: <https://bit.ly/38jmW6S>

The U.S. Forest Service news release reported that:

- The southwestern area of the fire continues to be active, backing down the Basket Pass Road, filling in Little Poso Creek Saturday. Crews and engines are working to hold the fire along Basket Pass Road and Rancheria Road. Active fire behavior was likely in Evans Flat on Sunday.
- The west side of the fire experienced little growth Saturday. Moving north, the fire continues to back very slowly. Firefighters with support from aircraft have been working spot fires and have tied handline and dozer line into the rocks at Black Mountain. Structure defense remains for resources including the Shirley Peak communication hub and the Southern California Edison 66kV sub-transmission lines north of Highway 155.
- The east side of the fire remained relatively quiet Saturday and crews were able to get some good depth in mopping up, allowing the evacuation order impacting the Isabella Heights and Wofford Heights communities to be downgraded to an evacuation warning.

Caldor Fire updates: Containment up as crews fight blaze on Lake Tahoe Basin's doorstep

By Vincent Moleski

Modesto Bee and Sacramento Bee, Sunday, Aug. 29, 2021

Fire crews have upped containment on the destructive Caldor Fire, which has burned for two weeks in El Dorado County and is looming west of the Lake Tahoe Basin.

The fire has spread east from its origin point near Omo Ranch nearly to Strawberry, an eastward push that has fueled concerns over the fire reaching South Lake Tahoe. The fire's leading edge was 12 miles away, Cal Fire said, and just outside of Strawberry and west of Sierra-at-Tahoe resort. To the fire's north is Desolation Wilderness, the Sierra crest that's more rock than trees.

But by Saturday morning, conditions had improved on the fire's eastern edge, giving firefighters a chance to improve containment on the 149,684-acre fire.

"The nighttime inversion layer returned bringing a reduction in fire spread, spotting, and visibility," Cal Fire and U.S. Forest Service officials wrote in a morning update. "Firing operations continued in the Eastern flanks, while firefighters took advantage of the slow easterly winds to improve control lines."

Containment grew to 19% overnight, up from 12% on Friday, "a pretty significant jump for us," Sacramento Fire Department Capt. Keith Wade said on behalf of Cal Fire on Saturday morning.

The focus Saturday, Wade said, was to keep the fire west of Strawberry and away from Echo Summit and the Tahoe Basin below.

Gusty winds blowing toward the iconic tourist destination are expected to pick up Sunday night and into next week, however, making Saturday's suppression efforts all the more important.

Light winds blew out enough smoke to allow helicopters to fly and attack the blaze from above briefly Saturday morning — those conditions evaporated by noon.

"Even without the wind," Wade said, "the fire has shown a propensity to grow and move."

The fire has destroyed 469 homes, 11 commercial properties and 170 other minor structures, according to fire officials. An additional 39 structures have been damaged, according to early damage assessment, which is still underway. More than 18,300 structures still remain threatened and the fire is still highly active.

Last week, the Caldor Fire burned through Grizzly Flats, destroying much of the small mountain town in the process.

Despite the improvement in containment, thousands remain evacuated from their homes across El Dorado County. On Friday, county officials made an additional evacuation order to include Pleasant

Valley Road south of Newtown Road to Mount Aukum Road. The community of Pleasant Valley is near another highly active area on the northwestern corner of the fire's acreage.

Fire officials said that the fire fight remains difficult in all areas of the Caldor Fire.

"Terrain continues to be challenging for fire crews throughout the fire," the Saturday morning update read.

Evacuations remain in place across much of El Dorado County, stretching from Camino and Pleasant Valley in the west to Phillips in the east. Evacuation warnings are also in place west of South Lake Tahoe. The El Dorado County Sheriff's Office has an online map showing orders and warnings in place.

On Thursday, the Sheriff's Office issued mandatory evacuation orders from Twin Bridges through Echo Summit as the Caldor Fire as it crept east through dry fuels toward the lake. Fire officials on Friday said they hoped to stop the fire from reaching the city of South Lake Tahoe west of Highway 89 at Echo Summit.

Another point of concern was Camp Sacramento, which was included in evacuation orders this week as the fire came within a few miles of the campground. Staffers at the camp, run by the city of Sacramento, left last week as a precaution.

AIR QUALITY POOR IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Cal Fire on Saturday morning said in a weather outlook that the areas surrounding the fire, including the Sacramento Valley and South Lake Tahoe, remain thick with wildfire smoke.

"We have widespread heavy smoke on the west side of the forecast area again this morning originating from fires to the north and downslope drainage from the Caldor," Cal Fire officials wrote. "This smoke will slowly lift under light winds and conditions should improve by late afternoon."

The Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District reported very unhealthy levels of smoke in the air Saturday, although the district expects some improvements over the next few days.

Sacramento County's air quality index was rated 201 by Saturday afternoon, indicating that everyone, and especially those with respiratory issues, should avoid long-term outdoor activity. By Sunday, the county's air quality level should drop down to 169, which is still considered unhealthy but would be a significant improvement from Saturday's level. Most people should reduce outdoor exertion in unhealthy air quality. By Monday, the air quality is expected to be unhealthy for sensitive groups.

The air quality district's live map shows broadly poor air quality across the Sacramento area, with worsening conditions to the northeast of the city of Sacramento's core. Folsom and El Dorado County communities east to Placerville are suffering the worst air quality in the Sacramento area, reaching hazardous levels, which means that all people should stay indoors in those areas.

Sacramento County officials issued a statement Saturday afternoon, warning locals to be aware of the poor air quality and to take precautions over the next few days.

"Smoke from wildfires most likely will affect Sacramento County for the next couple of days and may last longer depending on the strength and direction of the winds and the fire status," county officials said in a news release. "Due to the unpredictable nature of wildfire smoke, particulate matter (PM) pollution levels can be elevated in one area, but not another."

The Caldor Fire started on Aug. 14 near Omo Ranch. A total of 3,302 fire personnel are assigned to the Caldor Fire, according to officials, along with 25 helicopters and 282 fire engines. Two civilians and two firefighters have been injured in the blaze.

Update: Caldor Fire destroys cabins, prompts new evacuations near South Lake Tahoe

By Sara Nevis, Vincent Moleski & Sam Stanton
Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, Aug. 29, 2021

The Caldor Fire continued its march Sunday toward the Lake Tahoe Basin, burning cabins near Echo Summit and forcing new evacuations as firefighters braced for heavy winds expected over the Sierra Nevada.

At least four cabins were on fire Sunday afternoon on the north side of Highway 50 near where Aspen Creek Road intersects with the highway, according to a Sacramento Bee photographer on the scene.

Winds were picking up Sunday afternoon and smoke was so heavy that visibility was reduced to a car length along the highway, which has been closed in both directions because of the blaze.

The cabins were burning roughly four miles west of Echo Summit, and smoke poured down and obscured visibility into Camp Sacramento, a popular city-owned recreation area that is roughly 2.5 miles west of Aspen Creek Road.

Late Sunday, Cal Fire issued evacuation orders for communities along Highway 89 on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe, and placed that city — and the rest of the Tahoe shore inside El Dorado County — under an evacuation warning.

The National Weather Service issued a Red Flag warning to be in place from 11 a.m. Monday to 11 p.m. Tuesday as strong southwesterly winds are expected to move in along the eastern edge of Northern California, including the Lake Tahoe area and the Caldor Fire zone.

The 156,515-acre Caldor Fire has been steadily pushing eastward toward the basin, and Weather Service officials warn that incoming winds gusting to 35 mph could create dangerous conditions for fire crews.

“The combination of gusty winds and low humidity can cause fire to rapidly grow in size and intensity before first responders can contain them,” Reno meteorologists wrote in the red flag warning.

Southwesterly winds have been pushing the Caldor Fire from its origin near Omo Ranch northeast toward its current extent just shy of Twin Bridges. Last week, red flag conditions and strong southwesterly winds caused the Caldor Fire to jump Highway 50, which remains closed from Pollock Pines to Meyers.

Highway 88 was also closed on Sunday from Dew Drop in Amador County to the Highway 89 junction. New evacuation orders were put in place along Highway 88 Sunday afternoon in the northeastern corner of Amador County.

Now, as the Caldor Fire comes within a dozen miles of Lake Tahoe, several historic mountain towns could be threatened.

Isaac Lake, a Cal Fire division chief, said that Sunday will be a critical day in the fight, as it's expected to be the hottest and driest day since the fire started in mid-August, and the red flag warning beginning Monday poses another “huge area of concern.”

Sacramento Fire Department Capt. Keith Wade, speaking from the east flank of the Caldor Fire as part of a Cal Fire mutual aid team, said that “everything is primed to ignite in this region right now” due to the extreme heat and low humidity.

Despite the incoming red flag weather, Cal Fire and U.S. Forest Service crews have made progress. On Saturday, firefighters managed to increase containment on the blaze by 7% and managed to hold containment at 19% Sunday.

In a joint morning status update, Cal Fire and the Forest Service said that overnight conditions moderated, allowing for more direct attack on the blaze.

“Fire activity was limited overnight due the inversion layer settling in, these fire conditions allowed crews to engage the fire directly,” fire officials said in the Sunday update. “Short range spotting and group touching continue with the most active fire activity present in the Northeast and Western sections of the fire.”

Lake said that overnight work was largely a preparation for incoming winds, taking advantage of better weather before it turns. On the east flank of the fire near Strawberry, crews remain poised for structure defense and direct attack. Lake said that no structures in the town have been burned, and crews are eager to get ahead of winds that could push the fire further northeast.

“The best way to defend structures is to just put the fire out,” Lake said. “We’re working to get as much done as we can before the wind event.”

Wade, speaking from Highway 50 near the site of Camp Sacramento — a camp run by the city of Sacramento that was preemptively evacuated last week — said that crews have prepared for fire advancement toward the campground.

“We have a lot of resources on the ground,” Wade said, although he noted that air support was not an option due to heavy smoke. He said dozer lines have been set up at the camp, vegetation has been cleared by hand crews and some structures have been wrapped with material designed to protect them from radiant heat.

The northeastern flank approaching the Lake Tahoe basin and a northwestern corner near Pleasant Valley remain the most active areas. An additional evacuation order was issued for Pleasant Valley communities Friday due to fire activity in the area.

Thousands of El Dorado County residents remain evacuated from their homes. Much of the county is under mandatory evacuation orders, from Pleasant Valley in the west to Echo Lake in the east. The El Dorado County Sheriff’s Office has an online map with complete information on evacuation orders and warnings.

Lake urged residents who are included in evacuation warnings, but who have not been ordered to leave to be ready to go.

“Give it credence,” he said.

Overnight growth on the fire was moderate, adding only 6,000 acres to the total. Damage assessments for homes and buildings destroyed in the fire are still ongoing. Thus far, 471 homes are confirmed destroyed, along with 11 commercial properties and 170 minor structures, according to fire officials. The fire destroyed much of the town of Grizzly Flats earlier this month.

The Caldor Fire started Aug. 14 near Omo Ranch. A total of 3,531 fire personnel are assigned to the fire, plus 25 helicopters and 329 engines.

A firefighter suffered a burn injury Saturday, Lake said, meaning a total of three have been injured in the blaze. The firefighter’s condition was not known.

Two civilians have been hurt in the fire, according to Cal Fire.

SACRAMENTO-AREA AIR QUALITY

Over the weekend, Sacramento’s air quality has been plagued by smoke.

The Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District reported an air quality level of 169 for Sacramento County on Sunday morning. That level is considered unhealthy, and district officials recommend reduced outdoor activity for everyone, and especially those at higher risk.

Monday could show some improvement, as the air quality management district predicts an AQI of 124 for Sacramento County, which would be unhealthy for sensitive groups.

As southwesterly winds move into the area of the Caldor Fire, Cal Fire officials suggest that smoke could blow away from Sacramento.

“This morning we again have smoke on the western side of the forecast area,” officials wrote in a Sunday smoke outlook, but the incoming winds “will continue to transport smoke from the Caldor Fire into the Tahoe Basin.”

Fresno faces more unhealthy air, triple-digit heat. When to expect cooler weather

By Yesenia Amaro

Fresno Bee, Sunday, Aug. 29, 2021

Fresno and the rest of the central San Joaquin Valley can expect to see at least two more days of triple-digit temperatures, according to the National Weather Service in Hanford.

Experts continue to urge residents to avoid or limit the outdoors due to the high temperatures coupled with the poor air quality from wildfires burning nearby.

“The biggest message right now is for folks to limit their time outdoors,” said Jerald Meadows, meteorologist in charge at the National Weather Service.

A heat advisory and an air quality advisory for the area remained in place Sunday. According to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the forecast for the air quality in the Fresno area mostly remains unhealthy for sensitive groups.

The air-quality index for Fresno on Sunday was expected at 147, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

That’s mainly due to smoke from several nearby wildfires, including the Caldor Fire, which is moving toward the mountains above Lake Tahoe, and the Walkers and French fires burning south of Fresno in Tulare and Kern counties, respectively.

Meanwhile, high temperatures won’t begin to drop until mid-week.

The high expected in Fresno on Sunday was 105 degrees, and 103 to 107 degrees for the San Joaquin Valley, Meadows said.

There is no heat advisory for Monday, but that could change through the day, he said. Only a slight change in temperatures is expected.

Temperatures in Fresno are expected to reach 104 degrees on Monday and 100 to 105 degrees for the San Joaquin Valley.

“We still want to caution people tomorrow (Monday) with temperatures above 100 degrees...especially with the air quality the way it is,” he said, noting it can exacerbate health conditions.

By Tuesday, temperatures will begin to drop, with a high of 100 degrees or right below 100 degrees in Fresno, Meadows said. By Wednesday, temperatures are expected to be in the mid-90s’, with 94-95 degrees in Fresno.

By the end of the week, temperatures of around 90 degrees are forecasted in Fresno.

“A lot more comfortable than it is right now,” Meadows said.

Roundup: Poor air quality affects Stanislaus District’s San Joaquin County high school football: Find out which Week 1 games have been canceled

Justin Frommer

The Stockton Record, Sunday, Aug 29, 2021

Week 1 of the 2021 fall football season is here.

This week’s games have been adjusted across the county due to air quality hazards and various game cancellations due to COVID-19 issues.

The Record will have score updates at 8 p.m., 9 p.m., 10:30 p.m. and midnight.

Thursday

FINAL: Weston Ranch 26, Mountain House 24

Friday

FINAL: Escalon 41, Calaveras 0

FINAL: Lathrop 49, Mt. Diablo 26

FINAL: Manteca 44, Patterson 17

FINAL: Sacramento 35, Ripon Christian 7

FINAL: Windsor 42, East Union 13

Edison (1-0) at Pleasant Valley (0-0) (CANCELED: Here is why)

Buhach Colony (0-1) at Tracy (0-1), 7 p.m. (Canceled due to air quality)

Ripon (0-1) at Sonora (0-1), 7 p.m. (Moved to Saturday at 6 p.m. due to air quality)

Tokay (1-0) at Bear Creek (0-1), 7:15 p.m. (Canceled due to air quality; game moved to 7:15 p.m. Monday)

McNair (0-1) at Lodi (1-0), 7:15 p.m. (Canceled due to air quality, teams looking to play Monday)

Lincoln (0-1) at Downey (0-1), 7:15 p.m. (Canceled due to air quality)

Davis (1-0) at Chavez (1-0), 7:15 p.m. (Canceled due to air quality)

Franklin (0-1) at Florin (0-0), 7:15 p.m. (Canceled due to air quality)

Stagg (0-1) at Kimball (1-0), 7:30 p.m. (Canceled due to air quality)

Saturday

FINAL: Bradshaw Christian 30, Linden 17

FINAL: De La Salle 52, St. Mary's 16

FINAL: Acalanes 59, Sierra 6

Ripon (0-1) at Sonora (0-1), 6 p.m. (Canceled due to smoke)

MORE: Why St. Mary's football coach Franks has more than just football to worry about

MORE: St. Mary's football using opener against De La Salle as a measuring stick

MORE: Linden JV, varsity games pushed due to COVID-19 contact tracing

MORE: Sierra football hit hard by COVID-19 early in season

UPDATED: French Fire now 22 percent contained; officials praise 'sheer amount of work' done to fight flames

By Christine L. Peterson

The Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021

More than 1,600 personnel are working to battle the French Fire in communities of the Kern River Valley, which received an important fire update Saturday night via livestream after technical glitches put it off for a day.

The French Fire is 22 percent contained after burning some 24,200 acres, and was "really wind-tested," one fire official said.

Throughout the livestreamed briefing, various fire officials and others noted an amazing spirit of cooperation to fight the fire that began Aug. 18, rescue residents and support the firefighters in their work.

"The spirit of this community has shown nothing but love and compassion and overwhelming support for the firefighters," California Interagency Incident Management Team 12 commander Michael Nobles said. "And I will tell you that that support felt by the firefighter fuels them, motivates them to go out and do the job that they do."

A total of 33 structures — 12 primary residences and 21 outbuildings or minor buildings such as sheds — have been lost, said Kern County Fire Department Division Chief Bill Steers. Primary residences may be someone's main home or summer home, but either way refers to a habitable structure.

Steers said a damage inspector specialist uses satellite images and tract maps to determine what has been destroyed, so property owners can be notified. He noted it's "always tough" to talk about property loss.

U.S. Forest Service Kern River District Ranger Al Watson praised the "sheer amount of work that was done" fighting the fire.

Watson noted that the fire was human-caused, as previously reported, and said the point of origin has been determined. However, it was not revealed, and Watson said the investigation remains underway.

Nobles said Hungry Gulch and Dutch Flats have been repopulated, as have Wofford Heights and Isabella Heights.

"The fire demonstrated extreme fire behavior," Nobles said.

He said there were a number of human rescues and evacuations in Wofford Heights. Nobles repeatedly called the spirit of cooperation among several firefighting and other agencies — and the community — "amazing."

The fire is being managed by the California Interagency Incident Management Team 12, coordinating with the Bureau of Land Management, Sequoia National Forest and Kern County Fire Department in unified command.

The U.S. Forest Service said anyone with information about the fire's cause is asked to email 2021.french@firenet.gov. The public can watch a replay of the Saturday night briefing on the Kern County Fire Department's Facebook page. For evacuation information, visit <https://bit.ly/38jmW6S>.

California Water Service, which provides water to the area, said via a news release that customers in Wofford Heights and eastern Split Mountain (those in the Homestead and Lake Properties tracts) who return to the area should flush their taps to move water that has been stagnant in pipes. That should take care of any taste or odor issues caused by water sitting unused, the utility said in a news release.

Cal Water said the systems in Wofford Heights and eastern Split Mountain are safe to use.

Cal Water's western Split Mountain customers, which includes those between 1928 and 2686 Evans Road and west of that — also called Zone 1, are under a do-not-drink/do-not-boil advisory issued after the fire destroyed the Cal Water station serving their area, the news release said.

Crews battle to protect Lake Tahoe region from wildfire

Bakersfield Californian, Saturday, Aug 28, 2021

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — Firefighters faced a critical day in efforts to prevent a massive California wildfire from reaching the Lake Tahoe resort region Saturday, hoping to take advantage of calmer winds before hot, heavy gusts return.

The Caldor Fire churned through mountains just southwest of the Tahoe Basin, cloaking much of the area in toxic smoke and sending tourists packing at a time when summer vacations would be in full swing ahead of the Labor Day weekend.

A favorable turn in weather Saturday afternoon allowed firefighters to make progress and increase containment of the Caldor Fire to 19%, up from 12% the day before, said Capt. Stephen Horner, a Cal Fire spokesman for the Caldor Fire. The fire so far has burned about 149,000 acres, or 233 square miles (603 square kilometers).

"It's going to be a very pivotal day for us," Horner said.

The fire's eastern edge was about 7 or 8 miles (11 or 13 kilometers) from the city of South Lake Tahoe and did not advance much overnight thanks to operations known as "backfiring," where firefighters get ahead of the blaze and burn up fuel so the fire has nothing to ignite, Horner said.

"They did backfiring operations that were nothing short of amazing last night in that area," Horner said.

Wind gusts were forecast for early Saturday up to 35 mph, but they tapered off with slower, weaker winds expected through the rest of the weekend, Cal Fire incident spokesman Henry Herrera said.

"We anticipate being able to make more progress over the weekend because of favorable wind conditions," Herrera said. But the slower winds were only expected to last two days.

A Fire Weather Watch was issued for Monday and Tuesday that will lead to "elevated fire weather concerns" in higher elevations of the Northern Sierra, Cal Fire said.

The Caldor fire has destroyed more than 600 structures since it started on Aug. 14 in the Sierra Nevada. It has proved so difficult to fight that fire managers this week pushed back the projected date for full containment from early next week to Sept. 8. But even that estimate was tenuous.

It is one of nearly 90 large blazes in the U.S. Many are in the West, burning trees and brush desiccated by drought. Climate change has made the region warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.

The Department of Defense is sending 200 U.S. Army soldiers from Washington state and equipment including eight U.S. Air Force C-130 aircraft to help firefighters in Northern California, the U.S. Army North said in a statement Saturday. The soldiers are expected to arrive in California in early September after a week-long training. The C-130s have been converted into airtankers that can dump thousands of gallons of water on the flames.

In California, 14 large fires are being fought by more than 15,200 firefighters. Fires have destroyed around 2,000 structures and forced thousands to evacuate this year while blanketing large swaths of the West in unhealthy smoke.

South Lake Tahoe City Manager Joe Irvin issued an emergency proclamation Thursday so the city that's home to Heavenly Ski Resort can be better prepared if evacuation orders come and be reimbursed for related expenses.

The last time the city declared a wildfire emergency was during the 2007 Angora Fire, which destroyed nearly 250 homes in neighboring Meyers and was the last major fire in the basin.

Friday night football games

By Quinton Hamilton

Modesto Bee, Saturday, Aug. 28, 2021

A number of Stanislaus District football games were canceled at the last minute Friday night due to unhealthy air quality as a result of nearby wildfires. Two games initially rescheduled for Saturday morning were called off when conditions did not improve.

High school sports can't be played if the Air Quality Index reads above 150.

The cancellations added to this week's chaos as games have been canceled or opponents changed due to COVID-19 contact tracing and positive results.

Here is a list of the games that were been affected by air quality:

- Clayton Valley at Turlock. The Ugly Eagles — yes, that's their nickname — were making the 2-hour bus drive from Concord only to have the game canceled. The varsity game was scheduled to be played Saturday at 10 a.m. but that was called off early Saturday morning. It has now been rescheduled for Monday.
- All Modesto City Schools games were canceled, including: Beyer at Modesto; Lincoln at Downey; and Enochs at West. Davis at Chavez (Stockton) was canceled; the Spartans were looking for an opponent to play on Saturday. Gregori at Merced was postponed and may be played on Monday.
- Hilmar's game at Los Banos was moved to Monday night.
- Ripon vs Sonora has been moved to Saturday at Ripon High School. Kickoff times are 2 p.m. (frosh), 4 p.m. (JV) and 6 p.m. (varsity)
- Central Valley at Pacheco has been rescheduled for Saturday at Pacheco. Kickoff scheduled for 5 p.m. (JV) and 7 p.m. (varsity).
- Central Catholic had its home game against St. Francis of Mountain View postponed. The two teams were going to try to play Saturday at 11 a.m. but the game was canceled Saturday morning.

Oakdale's scheduled game against Edison of Stockton and Pitman's scheduled game against Lincoln of Stockton were both canceled due to COVID-19 precautions earlier in the week.

California wildfires continue to impact Valley air quality

Hanford Sentinel, Friday, August 27, 2021

Ongoing wildfires occurring throughout California are continuing to cause smoke impacts to the San Joaquin Valley. While San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties are inundated with smoke from multiple Northern California fires, smoke from the Walkers and French fires are impacting Tulare County and the Valley portion of Kern County. Additionally, northwesterly winds are anticipated to further transport wildfire smoke throughout the Valley. As a result, the District has issued an Air Quality Alert with the National Weather Service. The District warns residents being impacted by smoke to remain indoors to reduce their exposure to particulate matter (PM) emissions.

Particulate matter can trigger asthma attacks, aggravate chronic bronchitis, and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke. Individuals with heart or lung disease should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of PM exposure. Those with existing respiratory conditions, including COVID-19, young children and the elderly, are especially susceptible to the health effects from this form of pollution. Anyone experiencing poor air quality due to wildfire smoke should move to a filtered, air-conditioned environment with windows closed. Common cloth and paper masks being used as protection from COVID-19 may not be sufficient protection from wildfire smoke inhalation.

The public is advised to visit the District's Wildfire Information page at www.valleyair.org/wildfires for details on current and recently past wildfires affecting the Valley.

Authorities: French Fire is 'human-caused,' 'suspicious in nature.' Sequoia blaze grows to 22,000 acres, 19% contained

By Joshua Yeager

Visalia Times-Delta, Friday, August 27, 2021

The French Fire that has scorched more than 22,000 acres in the Sequoia National Forest and forced thousands of residents to evacuate was "human-caused" and "suspicious in nature," authorities announced Wednesday evening.

Investigators collected evidence during a preliminary investigation that suggested humans sparked the blaze that is only 19% contained nine days after starting on Aug. 18., Forest Supervisor Teresa Benson said.

"The groundwork is complete," she said. "The evidence that they collected is being processed and analyzed."

The French Fire is burning west of Lake Isabella, a popular boating and fishing destination in the southern Sierra Nevada, about 30 miles northeast of Bakersfield. Nearly half a dozen mountain communities in the region have been evacuated as crews battle the growing blaze.

But gusty winds, low humidity and high temperatures have created several challenges for firefighters. Late Tuesday, the fire made a run toward Wofford Heights, a tourist community of about 2,000 people.

"It was a very tense situation. We stayed through the night praying for the whole community," said Dennis Kelley, a local Pala Ranches resident of 22 years. "You could hear helicopters humming all night long, making drops [of water and retardant]. Those helicopters saved us."

When firefighters mobilized to protect Wofford Heights, as many as half of the town's residents remained, said John Owings, section chief of incident command team 12. Firefighters prioritized evacuating the town before successfully building a containment line, he said.

"It's a very special place, and we just want to help this firefight. So when you're asked to evacuate that's what you need to do. You need to do that for your safety and for the safety of the firefighters, so that they can get in there and do their job," Benson said.

The Wofford Heights Chevron remained open with the blessing of firefighters, who supplied a generator so that the station could continue pumping gas for first responders and evacuees.

"We're doing everything we can to help. It was pretty scary. We had no power for about 24 hours," said Arminster Singh, a station employee. He noted that the store was running low on essentials such as eggs, bread and milk.

Some homes and buildings were lost to the fire but the extent of the damages won't be known until assessment teams can safely complete their work, said Michael Nobles, the incident management team leader.

"I know that the anxiety that the community has waiting for this information. If I was in your position, I'd be on the edge of my seat waiting to hear that information," he said. "So we're working diligently to make sure we complete that process in a timely, but also in a very thorough manner so we don't get that information wrong."

As of Thursday, no Tulare County communities have been affected by French Fire.

"We are heavily engaged in the planning of this incident," said Jeff McLaughlin, division chief, Tulare County Fire Department. "When this fire, or if this fire does threaten any of our communities, we are fully prepared to engage if necessary."

About 50 people stayed overnight in evacuation centers operated by the Red Cross on Wednesday, a spokesperson said. Many others visited the centers, located at Woodrow Wallace Elementary School and Kern River Valley High School in Lake Isabella, for supplies and information.

A third evacuation center at Pioneer Elementary School in Delano was opened Thursday.

Gov. Gavin Newsom announced earlier this week that his office had secured a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to reimburse 75% of fire suppression costs to responding agencies.

The following communities are under an evacuation order, meaning there is an immediate danger to life and property: Wofford Heights, Pala Ranches, Shirley Meadows, Alta Sierra, Slick Rock, Dutch Flat, Isabella Highlands, Wagy Flat, Black Gulch, and Keyesville North and South.

The following communities are under an evacuation warning, meaning there is a potential threat to life and property: Glennville, Linns Valley, Poso Flat, Pine Mountain, and Badger Canyon.

Officials are asking anyone who may have information or tips about suspicious activity to contact investigators via email at 2021.french@firenet.gov.

Excessive heat, poor air quality hitting Fresno and the Central Valley. But for how long?

By Joshua Tehee

The Fresno Bee, Friday, Aug. 27, 2021

Fresno is in the midst of a triple threat of weather-related risks.

The National Weather Service issued a heat advisory for San Joaquin Valley on Saturday, where temperatures of 102 to 107 degrees are likely through Sunday. At the same time, it is calling for elevated fire conditions in the Tulare County mountains, especially in the afternoons when there is typically lower relative humidity.

Compounding things are several massive wildfires burning across the state, including the Caldor Fire, which is moving toward the mountains above Lake Tahoe. The Walkers and French fires are burning south of Fresno in Tulare and Kern counties, respectively.

On Friday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued an air-quality alert as northwesterly winds transported wildfire smoke into the Valley.

The smoke was so bad in parts of Fresno on Friday night that officials stopped a high school football game between San Joaquin Memorial and Hanford at halftime. The air-quality index in Fresno was 164, an unhealthy level. Good AQI readings register from 0 to 50. The level of particulate matter in the air was well above safe levels.

Looking at readings for Fresno on Saturday, purpleair.com reported several spots with PM2.5 particulate levels at or exceeding 150, the level at which everyone will experience health affects from prolonged exposure.

During this time residents should take measures to mitigate smoke risk, including keeping windows and doors closed and using fans and air conditioning to stay cool. Set air conditioning systems to recirculate mode, or close the outdoor intake damper.

Those with evaporative coolers should avoid using them unless there is a heat emergency.

At least one of the hazards will let up next week, as temperatures are forecast to drop to the highs 90s on Tuesday. By Friday, highs in the area could be in the upper 80s to low 90s, the Weather Service said.

California on fire: 11 wildfires have burned more than 1.3 million acres

By Bethany Blankley | The Center Square contributor
The Tracy Press, Friday, Aug 27, 2021

(The Center Square) – Since July 14, the Dixie Fire, which has been divided into two zones, has burned at least 749,713 acres and is only 45% contained, according to a new report by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection or Cal Fire.

It's currently raging through the northern California counties of Butte, Plumas and Shasta.

More than 690 residential structures and 139 commercial structures have been destroyed, WildFire Today reports.

On Thursday, Cal Fire officials issued a warning for Dixie Fire's West Zone, saying, "A multi-day warming trend that started today will bring warmer than normal temperatures with possible single-digit daytime humidities through the weekend."

Officials have issued numerous evacuation orders for residents in these counties and closed down the Lassen National Forest and the Plumas National Forest.

On Friday, the National Weather Service in Sacramento said, "Smoke from area wildfires will continue to result in poor air quality" throughout parts of northern California.

Cal Fire Chief Thom Porter said the Dixie Fire is the first "that has burned from the west side of the mountain range over into the valley floor on the east side of the mountain range."

It is the second largest wildfire in California history, behind the 2020 August Complex Fire, which burned 1,032,648 acres.

At least 21 helicopters, 370 engines, 172 dozers, 167 water tenders and 4,833 personnel have been assigned to combat the Dixie Fire, Cal Fire reports.

Meanwhile, the Caldor Fire is currently the nation's main priority for assigning firefighting resources, Cal Fire states, which is being fought with the aid of 21 helicopters, 245 engines and dozens of bulldozers.

The Caldor Fire has destroyed over 637 homes, businesses and other structures, with nearly 2,900 firefighters assigned to fight it since Aug. 14. It destroyed the historic mining town of Grizzly Flats, including nearly all homes, its school post office and buildings that were over 100 years old.

Combined, the Caldor and McFarland fires have burned more than 100,000 acres.

The Monument Fire, in Trinity County, is currently the second largest wildfire in the state having already burned 157,557 acres and being only 20% contained.

As Cal Fire officials reported four new fires on Thursday, the state's 11 active wildfires had already burned over 1.3 million acres.

Projected containment of fire near Lake Tahoe pushed back

By Sam Metz and Brian Melley Associated Press
The Business Journal, Friday, August 27, 2021

(AP) — Firefighters battling a stubborn California wildfire Friday near the Lake Tahoe resort region faced gusty winds and dry conditions that made vegetation ready to burn.

The Caldor Fire has proved so difficult to fight that fire managers this week pushed back the projected date for full containment from next week to Sept. 8, but even that estimate was tenuous.

"I think that's going to be assessed on a day-by-day basis," said Keith Wade, a spokesman for the incident management team.

Burning since Aug. 14 in the Sierra Nevada, the Caldor Fire has scorched nearly 144,000 acres, or 225 square miles (583 square kilometers), and remained only 12% contained early Friday.

Winds and temperatures were expected to pick up over several days while humidity drops, adding to the challenges endured by crews working in rugged terrain.

"That's what's closing the window of opportunity we've had to make progress and really get hold of the fire," said Daniel Berlant, assistant deputy director of the state firefighting agency.

The Caldor Fire is one of nearly 90 large blazes in the U.S. Many are in the West, where they burn trees and brush desiccated by a megadrought. Climate change has made the region warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.

On Friday, flames churned through mountains just southwest of the Tahoe Basin, home to thousands and a playground for millions of tourists who visit the alpine lake in summer, ski at the many resorts in winter and gamble at its casinos year-round.

Johnny White and Lauren McCauley decided to flee their home in the mountains above Lake Tahoe once they could see flames on the webcam at their local ski resort.

Even as ash rained down under a cloud of heavy smoke, the couple wasn't panicked about leaving their home near Echo Summit, about 10 miles (16 kilometers) south of the lake. An evacuation order issued Thursday spanned from Twin Bridges to Echo Summit, and though the couple felt the flames were still far enough away, they wanted to avoid any last-minute pandemonium if the wildfire continued its march toward the tourist destination on the California-Nevada border.

"You don't want everyone in the basin panicking and scrambling to try and leave at the same time," McCauley said.

Echo Summit, a mountain pass where cliff-hanging U.S. Route 50 begins its descent toward Lake Tahoe, is where firefighters plan to make their stand if the Caldor Fire keeps burning through dense forest in the Sierra Nevada.

"Everything's holding real good along Highway 50," said Cal Fire Operations Section Chief Cody Bogan. "The fire has been backing down real slowly. ... We've just been allowing it to do it on its own speed. It's working in our favor."

In California, 14 active, large fires are being fought by more than 15,200 firefighters. Fires have destroyed around 2,000 structures and forced thousands to evacuate in the state this year while blanketing large swaths of the West in unhealthy smoke.

A new fire broke out Thursday in the Sierra foothills, forcing evacuations near the historic Gold Rush town of Sonora, just dozens of miles from Yosemite National Park.

The Caldor Fire has been the nation's top firefighting priority because of its proximity to Lake Tahoe, where its tourist economy should be in full swing this time of year.

"This is the week before Labor Day weekend — a busy weekend, normally," South Lake Tahoe City Manager Joe Irvin said. "That is not going to be the case this year."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency noted in a report on the fire that "social, political and economic concerns will increase as the fire progresses toward the Lake Tahoe Basin." The agency did not immediately respond to a request to elaborate beyond that statement.

Visitors are still crowding the highway that loops the massive lake and riding bikes and walking the beaches, but many are wearing masks. The lake, known for its water clarity and the granite peaks that surround it, has been shrouded in dense smoke that has reached hazardous levels.

The Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority reversed its advice from earlier in the week and recommended tourists postpone their travel. Previously the group that promotes tourism on the south side of the lake advised letting visitors decide whether to cancel their trips amid smoke and approaching fire.

Carol Chaplin, the president and CEO, said hotels and lodges were in lockstep with public safety officials. "They understand that this is not the experience that their guests are used to or look forward to," she said.

Irvin issued an emergency proclamation Thursday so the city that's home to Heavenly Ski Resort can be better prepared if evacuation orders come and be reimbursed for related expenses.

The last time the city declared a wildfire emergency was during the 2007 Angora Fire, which destroyed nearly 250 homes in neighboring Meyers and was the last major fire in the basin.

Not far from the neighborhood that was largely wiped out in that fire, residents on Thursday hurried to clear pine cones and needles from their roofs and gutters to prepare for the possibility of fire.

The Angora Fire, which was driven by strong winds and took residents by surprise, burned just 3,100 acres, or less than 5 square miles (13 square kilometers).

Retired fire district captain Joe McAvoy, who lost his own home in the 2007 fire, said wildfires larger than 100,000 acres, or 150 square miles (390 square kilometers), were once-in-a-lifetime events in his career. Not anymore.

"Now it seems like they're all 100,000 acres," McAvoy said. It's way more extreme. ... Now (fires) are 100,000 acres, and it's like, 'Oh, yeah, big deal.' You know, it's every fire."

Edison game at Pleasant Valley called off due to air quality

Justin Frommer

Stockton Record, Thursday, Aug. 27, 2021

While the Edison football team went through its normal pre-practice stretches Wednesday afternoon, head coach Booker Guyton scrambled to find a new opponent for Friday night.

The Vikings joined the list of San Joaquin County footballs teams looking for a new opponent for Week 1 after their scheduled game against Oakdale was canceled due to positive COVID-19 cases in the Mustangs' program.

"Very big surprise," Guyton said. "This is what my biggest fear was dealing with this in the spring and now here we are in the fall dealing with it again. No knock against Oakdale. It happens. ... It is frustrating as a coach. You got to hold your breath all the way up until kick-off."

Guyton said he was notified at 1 p.m. that his team needed to find a new opponent.

Edison currently has calls into Sheldon and El Camino for possible games Friday, according to Guyton.

During the spring season, the Vikings had multiple games canceled due to COVID-19 issues within their opponents' programs, including their opening game against Chavez. Back then, Guyton was able to find a last-minute game against McClymonds of Oakland. But with only two days to spare this week before Friday, he really has to rush.

"That is the frustrating part. You prepared all week for an opponent and now you are told that the opponent has COVID," Guyton said. "You try to scramble and are not prepared against a team you get ready to play. This new brand of football is just very disheartening."

The Vikings opened the 2021 fall season with a dominant 26-7 victory over intracity rival Lincoln. Guyton said he loved how his team defended its own turf against the Trojans, who were Edison's lone loss during the spring season. But with no current opponent set for Friday night, the Vikings have reverted to working on fundamentals during practice.

"We got to hit those points all over again because we are not preparing for anybody," Guyton said. "We are not scheming. When you don't scheme you got to go back to the basics, so that is what we are harping on today, getting our alignment assignments and knowing our spots and making sure we tackle properly and get to the areas we are supposed to be."

Edison was the third San Joaquin County football team to have its Week 1 game affected by COVID-19 after Ripon Christian and Linden were forced to alter their schedules.

Ripon Christian also announced Wednesday it will no longer be playing East Nicolaus, their original scheduled opponent for this Friday, due to positive COVID-19 tests within the East Nicolaus program. Ripon Christian will now host Sacramento High School on Friday night.

On Tuesday, Linden announced its game against Bradshaw Christian would be moved to Saturday due to positive COVID-19 within the program. Last week, Lodi also had its Week 0 game last week at Grant pushed to Sept. 17 due to positive COVID-19 tests.

Plan for green jobs at a plant originally built for war approved in Riverbank

By John Holland

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021

Riverbank officials took their biggest step to date Tuesday night on turning the old Army ammunition plant into a hub for green jobs.

The City Council voted 5-0 in support of enterprises that will include making ethanol from woody orchard waste. The 173-acre site at Claus and Claribel roads already has companies involved in various ventures, green and otherwise.

The votes came 12 years after the closure of the plant, which employed about 3,500 people at its peak during the Vietnam War.

The conversion has been slow, in part because of Army bureaucracy and the ongoing cleanup of toxic waste. About 650 people now work for 35 companies leasing space at the site, in areas such as plastic recycling, conventional fuels, railcar management, pest control and auto repair.

Riverbank aims for at least 2,000 total jobs as other parts of the site are occupied in the coming years.

"It's really going to transform the area, the green jobs impact both directly and indirectly ...," Councilman Luis Uribe said.

The ethanol plant will be built by Aemetis Inc., which already owns a Keyes plant that has made ethanol from Midwestern corn since 2011.

The Cupertino-based company expects to employ about 50 people in Riverbank, while generating perhaps 1,000 jobs for contract haulers of orchard waste.

Construction could start on the plant next year and finish by early 2024, said Eric McAfee, chairman and CEO at Aemetis, after the votes. He donned a hardhat at the podium to celebrate Tuesday's milestone.

Aemetis also will be the "master developer" for the remaining vacancies, taking over from the city government. Riverbank will get up to \$11.6 million in lease and purchase payments from Aemetis for 105 acres of developed and vacant land. This includes the current businesses, the ethanol site and land close to Claus for three upcoming buildings for new tenants.

OPEN BURNING WILL END IN 2025

The ethanol plant will help almond and walnut growers meet a mandate to end open burning of orchard waste by 2025. Clean-air advocates say residents suffer when growers torch pruned limbs and trees pulled out of production.

The ethanol project also will help the battle against climate change. Experts calculated that it will cut overall carbon emissions thanks to reductions in orchard burning and conventional fuel use.

Rep. Josh Harder, D-Turlock, welcomed Tuesday's vote in an emailed statement from his Washington, D.C., office. He toured the plant in February and earlier helped Aemetis wade through federal rules on foreign investment.