

Big Sur fire was sparked by embers from a private burn pile

By Andres Picon

San Francisco Chronicle, Tuesday, Jan. 25, 2022

The Colorado Fire that has been tearing through parts of the Big Sur coast this week was sparked by hot embers from a private pile burning operation, fire officials said.

The winter blaze ignited Friday night in the Palo Colorado Canyon and by Tuesday was burning about 700 acres in the hills of Monterey County, having triggered evacuation orders, shutting down a portion of Highway 1 and destroying one structure. The fire was 45% contained Tuesday, according to Cal Fire.

Strong winds in the region Friday evening blew hot embers from the burning operation onto vegetation nearby, starting the fire, Cal Fire said Tuesday.

Jon Heggie, a Cal Fire battalion chief, said the burning operation appeared to have been on a residential property. Whether the residents had a burn permit, which is required in the area where the fire started, is under investigation, he said.

Strong winds swept through much of coastal California Friday night, reaching speeds of up to 50 miles per hour. The gusts made for prime fire-starting conditions, and once the blaze sparked, the winds fanned the flames, posing challenges for firefighters, officials said.

“Obviously when there’s fire danger and high winds are blowing it’s not a good idea to have debris burning at any point, just because of the potential of starting a fire,” Heggie said.

A January wildfire, while not common, is not unheard of, Heggie said. The ongoing dry spell this winter and the coast’s dry terrain may have contributed to the Colorado Fire’s growth.

Best practice for debris burning calls for a “defensible space strategy,” Cal Fire officials said. The agency recommends that piles of debris set to be burned be smaller than four feet in diameter. Maintain at least 10 feet of clearance around the burn pile and keep water and a shovel handy, officials said.

Wildfires in January? Scientists say climate change could fuel 'a continuous fire season'

By Kurtis Alexander

San Francisco Chronicle, Wednesday, Jan. 26, 2022

Even with all the wildfires California has endured, it was a shock to see flames searing the Big Sur coast this week — in the middle of winter.

The January blaze, which on Tuesday had burned 700 acres and was threatening homes in the rugged Palo Colorado Canyon, is believed to be the result of a stray ember from a burn pile. Scientists, though, say the fire was made possible by an unusually long dry spell in winter coupled with a landscape increasingly primed for fire by the warming climate.

The winter months are typically when the state gets its heaviest rains, and a break from wildfire. But Big Sur has seen less than a tenth of an inch of rainfall this month. Despite the onslaught of storms in December, many coastal areas are dry again and brimming with dead, combustible brush after two years of drought that’s been intensified by climate change.

“I was totally surprised by the fire,” said Craig Clements, professor of meteorology at San Jose State University and director of the school’s Wildfire Interdisciplinary Research Center. “But after looking at some of the data, I was like, ‘Yeah, it makes sense.’”

Because of rising temperatures and more intense bouts of drought in recent decades, the window for wildfires has grown and California’s fire season is now longer than it was. A study by the science and news organization Climate Central estimates that the threat of wildfires in western states lasts 105 days more today than it did in the 1970s.

Over the past 10 years, some of California's worst fires have erupted on the cusp of winter. The Central Coast's 281,893-acre Thomas Fire in 2017, the eighth largest in state history, ignited Dec. 4 and burned through March. The 2018 Camp Fire, the state's deadliest blaze, began in November, even after a period of rain, and burned through Thanksgiving. In Big Sur, the 2014 Pfeiffer Fire destroyed 34 homes shortly before Christmas.

The potential for flames this winter remains particularly high because many areas of the state have experienced their two driest back-to-back years, as well as record heat.

"More drought creates a longer fire season or even a continuous fire season through the year," Clements said.

On Friday, when the Colorado Fire broke out on scrub-covered coastal hills about 20 miles south of Carmel-by-the-Sea, conditions in Big Sur were ripe for burning.

The only rain the region had seen this month was on Jan. 7, and just .08 inches at that, according to National Weather Service data. Big Sur Station, where the weather service keeps a monitoring gauge, averages 8.16 inches of rain in January.

Meanwhile, high temperatures for the month were hovering nearly 4 degrees above average.

As a result, moisture levels of dead fuels, the vegetation that typically feeds fires like grasses and pine needles, were in the single percentages, according to estimates from San Jose State's Wildfire Interdisciplinary Research Center.

Making matters worse, winds had picked up Friday before the fire started, gusting to about 30 mph out of the northeast.

"The weather conditions were dry and breezy," said Roger Gass, a forecaster with the National Weather Service who was working that night in Monterey. "It just reminds folks to always be vigilant."

Investigators with Cal Fire, the state's firefighting agency, announced late Tuesday that the Colorado Fire was caused by a burn pile that had sprayed hot embers amid strong winds. Fire officials did not immediately disclose where the burn was, nor who lit it and whether anyone would be cited for a crime.

LeRoy Westerling, a climate scientist at UC Merced, says such out-of-season blazes, no matter what the cause, are likely to become more frequent because temperatures are going up and California's forests and grasslands simply aren't suited to the heat.

"In a sense, we have a lot of vegetation on the landscape that no longer matches the climate system," he said.

In order to get things in balance, California would need to get a lot more precipitation on its wildlands, he said, and that's not happening.

The past two years have seen record acreage burn. In 2021, fires consumed 2.6 million acres in California, about a million more than the five-year average, according to Cal Fire. In 2020, 4.2 million acres burned.

As of Tuesday, the Colorado Fire was about 45% contained, Cal Fire officials said, yet hundreds of residents were still under orders to evacuate.

One yet-to-be-identified structure had burned, and across social media, stunned Californians were circulating photos of flames above the ocean and beside the iconic arches at the Rocky Creek and Bixby bridges. Scenic Highway 1 remained closed between Garrapata Creek and Point Sur. Nearly 500 firefighters were working to stop the blaze.

"We've had fires in December, January and February," said Jon Heggie, a Cal Fire battalion chief. "It's on the rarer side, but it's not out of scope of what we're seeing now."

BLM planning controlled burns to reduce potential wildfire fuel

The Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Jan. 24, 2022

Fire crews with the Bureau of Land Management's Bakersfield field office are planning to improve the fire resiliency of the Chimney Creek Campground and Chimney Peak Fire Station, as well as create defensible space around the historic Keyes Mine, by burning about 100 piles of fuels that could feed a wildland fire.

Pile burn operations near Lake Isabella and Chimney Peak in Kern and Tulare counties are scheduled to start Tuesday, Feb. 1, and continue periodically until spring, depending on weather and air quality conditions, onsite observations and resource availability.

The piles to be burned are smaller, so minimal smoke would be visible from Lake Isabella.

The prescribed fire is part of a fuels-reduction effort to strategically thin downed hazard trees; eliminate dangerous ladder fuels, which can feed flames to the treetops; and remove overgrown brush and branches. The controlled burns will help increase protection of the wildland-urban interface for the community of Lake Isabella and around the fire station, as well as improve landscape health. Pile burning is done in the winter months to take advantage of cooler temperatures and higher moisture levels to prevent the spread of wildland fire.

For more information, please call the BLM Bakersfield Field Office at 661-391-6000.