

Crews make slow progress on Yosemite fire as chance of rain increases

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By Brianna Vaccari



Old El Portal resident Steve Speltz talks about the El Portal fire and the reasons he decided not to evacuate from his home, at right. He has lived there since 1979 and the local fire department is right across the street and he felt there was no danger to himself, his home and his two cats.

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Firefighters made slow progress Monday to carve containment lines around the 2,600-acre El Portal blaze on the western edge of Yosemite National Park as thunderclouds overhead offered a hope of rain -- and a threat of lightning that could make things worse.

Crews were able to build containment lines around 5% of the wildfire, which was ignited Saturday afternoon near the community of El Portal.

About 700 fire personnel are fighting the flames in challenging terrain. The hillsides are steep and vegetation is thick and dry, fire officials said. Smoke



from the fire grew heavier Monday in Yosemite Valley.

The fire prompted officials to order evacuations in the communities of El Portal and Foresta. Three campsites, Crane Flat, Yosemite Creek and Bridalveil Creek were also evacuated and closed. The fire destroyed one duplex in Foresta.



At a public briefing Monday evening at El Portal School, fire officials told El Portal residents they would be allowed back in their homes at 9 a.m. Tuesday.

El Portal fire

Click on the map for fire details

Map updated as of Monday morning

A subtropical high-pressure system coming from Mexico shrouded the Sierra and parts of the central San Joaquin Valley in clouds, keeping temperatures cooler than expected. Fresno was expected to reach 101 on Monday, but hit just 98, about the seasonal average. Lemoore and Reedley received a trace of rain Monday morning.

The system could bring a 20% chance of thunderstorms to El Portal Tuesday. Rain would be helpful but accompanying lightning could spark more fires, fire officials said.

The Sierra, including the Yosemite area, could receive anywhere from 0.25 to 0.5 of an inch of rain, said Jeff Barlow, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Hanford. The chance of rain jumps to 40% at night in the higher elevations.

But Barlow said "dry lightning" -- or lightning caused by moisture arriving in an area with extremely dry air - is not likely in Yosemite. The moisture there is too deep, he said.

Temperatures in Yosemite were expected to sink to the low 70s overnight Monday, and are expected to reach the upper 90s Tuesday. Winds will be between 5 and 10 mph and could get gusty or erratic, Barlow said.

By Wednesday, the Yosemite skies are expected to clear out and make way for sunshine, he said.

In Fresno, residents can expect triple digits over the next few days. Temperatures will range from 100 to 105 this week, Barlow said.

"It's been hot, and it's going to stay hot," Barlow said.

The heat is relative though, he said, since temperatures have only been 3-4 degrees above average.

In Yosemite National Park, employees displaced by the fire have been placed on administrative leave, according to a daily report issued by the park.

A handful of Ahwahnee Hotel employees who live in El Portal moved into temporary housing units in Yosemite Valley, said Lisa Cesaro, a spokeswoman for Delaware North Companies Parks & Resorts at Yosemite.

So far, hotel reservations have remained steady, and there haven't been many cancellations due to the fire, she said. If there were cancellations, it was more likely guests had asthma-related concerns from the smoke in Yosemite Valley, Cesaro said.

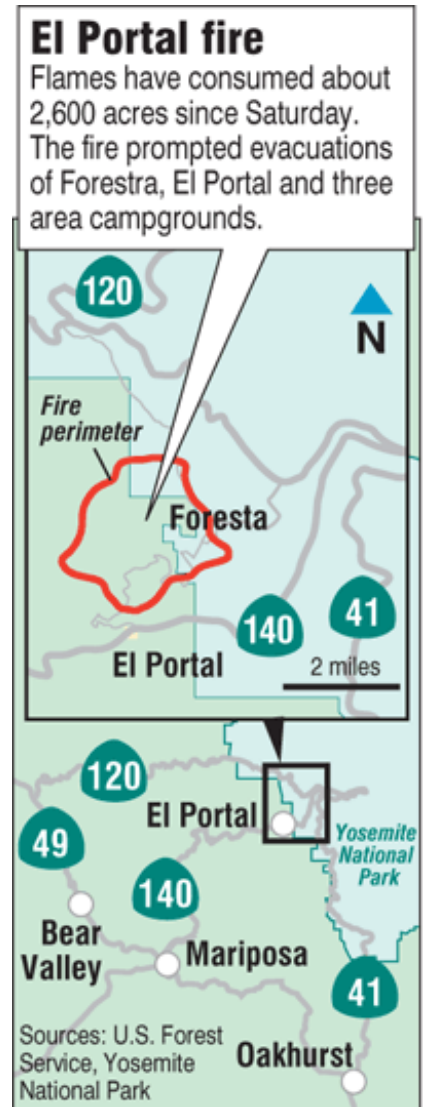
Highway 120, or Big Oak Flat Road, is closed between Crane Flat Road and the Highway 140 junction.

Highways 140 and 41, along with Tioga Road, are all open, but visitors should expect delays.

The blaze is burning south of last year's Rim fire, which seared more than 250,000 acres in and around Yosemite.

Firefighting personnel are from the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service and Cal Fire were working on the El Portal fire.

Staff photographer Mark Crosse contributed to this report. The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6679 or bvaccari@fresnobee.com.



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