

Drone almost blocks California firefighting planes

sacbee.com/2014/07/28/6586681/drone-northern-california-wildfire.html

By FENIT NIRAPPIL and SUDHIN THANAWALA

SHINGLE SPRINGS, Calif. -- A private drone trying to record footage of a Northern California wildfire nearly hindered efforts to attack the flames from the air, but firefighters made enough progress to allow most of the 1,200 people under evacuation orders to return home Monday.

An unmanned aircraft that aimed to get video of the blaze burning near vineyards in the Sierra Nevada foothills east of Sacramento was sighted Sunday, two days after the fire broke out, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection spokeswoman Lynne Tolmachoff said.

Authorities told the man controlling the drone to stop it from flying because of the potential danger to firefighting planes. The man, whom Tolmachoff did not identify, was not cited.

"This is the first one that I'm aware of," she said. "These unmanned aircraft are becoming very popular with people, and there's a possibility we will see more of them."

Crews held the fire to a little under 6 square miles, increasing containment to 75 percent by Monday evening, state fire Battalion Chief Scott McLean said. Most evacuees were allowed to return home except those who lived in a roughly square mile patch of land.

"We're not going to get complacent, but it's looking very good," McLean said.

Amy Russell, 35, was among those given the OK to go home. The location of her home on the outskirts of the fire gave her hope it was still standing.

"It'd be very hard to lose everything. It's a fixer-upper house, so we could rebuild it if it burned down, but it would be a real emotional loss," said Russell, who was at a Red Cross shelter set up at a high school with her two daughters, Abigail, 3, and Anneliese, 2.

She managed to pack essentials, including a safe with legal documents, as well as sentimental items such as wedding photos and a wooden jewelry box her husband made.

The fire has destroyed 13 homes and 38 other structures near wine-growing regions in Amador and El Dorado counties since it started Friday, as it burns in rugged grassland and timber. Some grapevines did burn, but crews were able to keep the fire from spreading to the main grape-growing area, Tolmachoff said.

The Sierra foothills fire is one of two in California that has forced people from their homes, underscoring the state's heightened fire danger this year after three years of drought created tinder-dry conditions.

Firefighters have responded to more than 3,600 fires so far this year, about 1,000 more than the average of the previous five years, Tolmachoff said. The fires have burned nearly 63 square miles. With several months still remaining in the fire season, more big blazes are expected.

The other fire about 100 miles away had burned through a little more than 4 square miles of brush and trees in Yosemite National Park, the neighboring Stanislaus National Forest and private land as of Monday morning and was sending smoke into Yosemite's famed valley.

It grew by about 500 acres overnight and was 5 percent contained, with a relentless air attack limiting its

spread, park spokesman Scott Gediman said.

The park itself — home to such sites as Half Dome mountain, Yosemite Meadows, a grove of Giant Sequoia trees and other wonders — remained open, and none of its treasures was threatened. But park officials warned hikers with respiratory problems to be careful because of the smoky air.

"It certainly grew, but it's still within approximately the same footprint and is not spreading rapidly," Gediman said.

An estimated 100 homes in Foresta and the small community of Old El Portal remained under evacuation. One home has been destroyed and two shelters have opened for people and animals.

Both fires took off quickly after they began, with triple digit temperatures and steep terrain hampering the firefight. The Sierra foothills fire started when a vehicle drove over vegetation.

"Wildfires are so uncontrollable, and people can start them so easily without knowing what they're doing," said Fred Shults, 65, who left his home in the path of the Sierra foothills fire with his wife, Carolyn, 58, as flames approached Friday. While eating lunch Monday at an evacuation shelter, the Shultses learned their home was spared, eliciting hugs from neighbors and friends.

The U.S. Forest Service reported a fire started early Monday east of Oakhurst in rugged terrain covering more than a square mile. The fire's cause and damage was unknown, but officials said that some roads leading to campgrounds were closed. Strong winds in the canyons created some challenges, officials said.

Wildfires also burned in other Western states, including Washington, Oregon and Colorado.

Thanawala reported from San Francisco. Associated Press writer Scott Smith in Fresno contributed to this report.

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