

Wildfires continue to spread in tinder-dry Sierra

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By Carmen George

Two large wildfires in the Sierra -- the El Portal fire threatening a Yosemite community, and the French fire mounting in the Sierra National Forest -- continue to spread, scorching thousands of dry, mountainous acres.

As of Wednesday night, the El Portal fire had burned at least 3,900 acres with 34% containment. As of 7:30 a.m. Thursday, the French fire had burned at least 7,024 acres with 10% containment.

"There's a lot of factors making it very difficult for fireman -- the heat, the humidity, the terrain -- then you have thunderstorm activity," National Weather Service meteorologist Jeff Barlow said about the fires.

Expect smoke from those fires to creep down the hills into the central San Joaquin Valley -- especially before 10 a.m. and after 10 p.m. when cooler smoke can get trapped beneath warmer air, Barlow said.

El Portal fire

The El Portal fire on Wednesday afternoon closed the Highway 120 Yosemite park entrance on the west side of the Sierra (the Big Oak Flat entrance). Wednesday evening, Yosemite National Park announced that all main roads within the park, including Highway 120, were reopened to traffic. That means motorists traveling along Tioga Road (the Highway 120 connector over the Sierra) can again access Yosemite Valley.

The fire started Saturday in El Portal along Highway 140 and flew up the mountain, destroying two homes in Foresta, which remains evacuated.

Fire officials said the blaze is burning up the Crane Creek drainage towards the Crane Flat Campground, which was previously closed. The Merced Grove of Giant Sequoias, located off Highway 120 between Crane Flat and the park entrance, could be in the fire's path, and officials were working out a plan to protect that region.

There were 1,063 personnel fighting the fire on Wednesday night -- costing at least \$3.15 million, officials said.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation. Some El Portal residents believe it was caused by an electric line.

Along with the closure of Crane Flat Campground, two other Yosemite campgrounds -- Yosemite Creek and Bridalveil Creek (used for firefighter stationing) -- remain closed.

French fire

The French fire -- first spotted early Monday morning between the Rock Creek and Fish Creek campgrounds near the San Joaquin River in Madera County -- was growing south and north.

The fire's southeast flank was progressing toward the boundary of the 2013 Aspen fire, which burned more than 22,500 acres north of Huntington Lake. There are at least 1,000 people battling the fire.

So far, 34 structures are threatened, but none have been lost, officials said Wednesday. Firefighters said their primary objective is to defend structures in the Hogue Ranch and Kinsman Flat area.

Twelve campgrounds and a couple of forest roads have been closed. They are listed online at <http://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/4013/>.

Dark Hole fire

The Dark Hole fire, another Yosemite blaze, had burned at least 647 acres and was 5% contained on Wednesday evening. The fire, begun by a lightning strike July 16, is burning near Yosemite Creek Campground off Tioga Road.

Thirty-one firefighters were battling this high-country fire on Wednesday.

Weather/air update

In Fresno County, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is predicting unhealthy air conditions for sensitive groups on Thursday. Air district officials warned that residents with respiratory conditions, young children and elderly people are more susceptible to smoky conditions and to follow doctors' orders when exposed to wildfire smoke.

Sporadic thunderstorms in the Sierra -- which should be settling down Thursday and onward -- have made firefighting efforts difficult, Barlow said.

When these storms weaken and collapse, "all bets are off" about what the wind might do, he said. "It can make winds blow all different directions and it's pretty dangerous."

As for some Sierra showers, they haven't helped squelch flames, Barlow said. Recently, the fires have received 1/4 to 1/2 an inch of rain, "but it's so incredibly dry up there, it's just awful." At least an inch of rain is needed to make a difference -- and that's not in the foreseeable forecast.

Firefighters fighting these Sierra fires can expect temperatures ranging from 95 to 100 degrees on Thursday, Barlow said.

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