

## Wildfire burns 21 structures near Bass Lake, prompts evacuations (video)

By Carmen George and Andrea Castillo

OAKHURST — A fire that swept from outside of Oakhurst to the edge of Bass Lake on Sunday damaged or destroyed 21 structures, blackened 320 acres and prompted an evacuation of hundreds of residents and visitors, including from the Bass Lake resort area.

A neighborhood around Cedar Drive and Road 426 was hit especially hard, with several homes turned to ash and smoldering embers.

Cal Fire Battalion Chief Chris Christopherson said he believed more than 10 homes had been lost, the majority off of Road 426 near Manzanita Drive on the crest of the hill.

"This is gut-wrenching," Christopherson said. "It makes you sick."

Jon Cunningham was among the unlucky.

Cunningham, 72, was home when he smelled the fire and saw the orange sky.

Cunningham told his wife there was a fire coming. Then he turned and saw the black smoke coming from the other side of the mountain.

"My wife and I looked back and saw our backyard was burning," he said. "So we didn't take much time. She drove one car, I drove the other car and we just left."

The couple grabbed what they could: one suitcase each, a computer and some business records.

Photo albums, handmade furniture, a 1930s piano, tools and everything else stayed behind and burned.

Cunningham's three-bedroom, two-bath house on Pine Drive is now ashes.

"When we got to the corner of (Road) 426, two large fir trees were just flaming like candles," he said.

He and his wife are staying with friends in Pierce Lakes. It's the first time they've lost a house in a fire, and they don't know what comes next.

"Pretty soon it'll settle in," he said, "but right now you deal with it as it comes."

By Monday morning, Cal Fire said the fire was 20% contained.

The fire, stoked by winds, threatened 400 homes and prompted officials to order the evacuation of about 1,000 people as well as their animals.

The American Red Cross opened evacuation centers at Oakhurst Community Center and North Fork Town Hall. Pets were being accepted at the Oakhurst shelter.

Large animals that are evacuated and need shelter can go to the Coarsegold Rodeo Grounds off Road 415, south of Coarsegold School, Cal Fire said. Those evacuating are asked to first call Thomas Bohna at (559) 760-5577.

At the Oakhurst Community Center, more than 30 residents had checked in as of 6 p.m., said community volunteer Jerry Ongman.

One of those evacuees, Mary Goddard, 75, an Oakhurst resident since 1997, said this is the fourth Oakhurst fire she's seen from her home this summer. "We've had too many ... I want to go home."

This is the first time she and her husband, Peter Goddard, 80, have been evacuated. "I'm scared, shaky, not sure if everything is OK."

Dozens of residents had parked along Highway 41 on Deadwood Mountain on Sunday afternoon, pointing at smoke plumes and aircraft buzzing above the flames.

The Bass Lake area was under pre-evacuation advisory notice Sunday night. As of 7 p.m., that has been reduced to advisory status for everything north of Recreation Point, including Road 432, Slide Creek and World Mark.

Cal Fire Capt. Frank Bigelow Jr. said the fire was moving slowly and fire officials didn't anticipate more evacuations Sunday night, although residents should "stay vigilant and stay aware of what's going on."

The cause is under investigation, Bigelow said. Fire crews had containment lines around 20% of the fire as of Sunday night, and said steep terrain and brush left dry by the drought have contributed to extreme fire behavior.

The fire started around 1:35 p.m. off Courtney Lane and headed uphill, cresting the ridge and then turning to the north and to the edge of Bass Lake.

Tom Tusso, manager of Bass Lake Water Sports and Boat Rentals, said Sunday around 5 p.m. that he had just been told by the sheriff's office to evacuate the business. At the time, five rental boats with about 50 people were out on the water.

"We're calling our guests and telling them to bring their boats back and following orders," he said by phone. "We should be out of here within the next 15-30 minutes."

Tusso said he could see 50-foot flames right across the lake. He said fire officials asked that the area near Angel Falls be cleared out so helicopters could land.

"They chased the fire down to the lake," he said. "Now the wind shifted and it appears it is turning around and going back up toward Oakhurst."

April Rodriguez, a front desk agent at The Pines Resort reached by phone around 5:30 p.m. Sunday, said the scene wasn't too hectic because everyone knew in advance what the game plan was if the pre-evacuation notice changed. Around 5 p.m., the resort was asked to evacuate, she said.

Rodriguez said 31 rooms would be evacuated and those due to check in Sunday night were being rerouted to safer areas.

"This (fire) actually was the closest one for us," she said. "The Junction fire luckily did not go over the ridge. This one is a little bit more interesting."

The Junction fire, which started in Oakhurst on Aug. 18, destroyed 20 structures, including the Suburban Propane office and at least eight homes, and damaged six structures.

"This is very similar to how the Junction fire moved through Oakhurst last month," the sheriff's office said on its Facebook page.

About 400 firefighters and other personnel swarmed into the Oakhurst and Bass Lake areas and continued working through the night. Fifteen aircraft also aided firefighting efforts Sunday.

Road closures in effect included Road 426 near Suncrest to Road 223; Road 222 to Road 432; Road 222 at Road 426; and Road 223 at Road 420 (Thornberry Road).

### **School closures**

The Courtney fire prompted school officials to close the following schools on Monday: Yosemite High School, Ahwahnee High School, Campbell High Community Day, and Evergreen High School in Oakhurst.

In the Bass Lake Joint Union Elementary School District, closures include Wasuma Elementary, Oakhurst Elementary and Oak Creek Intermediate schools.

Yosemite Unified School District's "Back to School Night" originally scheduled for Monday has been postponed.

### **Monday morning update**

Cal Fire said Monday at 8:30 a.m. that the fire is 20% contained, with no estimated date of containment. It was standing at 320 acres, same as overnight.

Firefighters are continuing to build and reinforce containment lines, Cal Fire said. There continues to be a threat to the Bass Lake Heights community.

Other data:

Fire engines: 30

Water Tender: 11

Fire Crews: 11

Bulldozers: 6

Helicopters: 4

Airtankers: 4

Total personnel: 330

Injuries: 1 (no other details available)

Structures destroyed/damaged: 21

Cause: under investigation

Evacuations: 300 structures with approximately 900 residents living in the northern part of Oakhurst and a section of Bass Lake near Road 222 are evacuated. Residents should remain cautious of fire personnel and equipment working in the area. Some residents in unaffected areas of the fire have been allowed to return home.

Road closures: Road 426 between Courtney Lane and Road 223

Road 222 between Road 432 (Rec Point) and Road 426

Road 426 between 222 and 223

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