

Bend residents return to ashes of homes

BEND (AP) — Residents sifted through the residue of their belongings Monday after a forest fire raced through the suburbs, destroying 20 houses.

Fire crews were able to hold the line around the 3,300-acre Awbrey Hall fire for the second straight day, leading fire officials to believe they can declare the blaze contained Tuesday night and controlled on Wednesday.

The blaze broke out Saturday and raced from treetop to treetop in a swath 12 miles long and two miles wide. The fire split around the Entrada Lodge motel, but drove through three rural subdivisions just a few miles from downtown, leveling houses in a seemingly random pattern.

By Sunday morning, most of the damage was done: \$5 million worth. Oregon Department of Forestry spokesman David Morman said \$4 million of that was accounted for by the 20 homes and eight outbuildings destroyed by the fire, and the rest was timber.

The number of houses destroyed was revised downward after officials went through the area Sunday night and checked the ruins against tax rolls, Morman said.

Department of Forestry spokesman Jim Fisher said the destruction of buildings was the worst in the state's history since 1936, when a forest fire leveled the city of Bandon.

"It ends one chapter and another chapter starts," said Don Morelock as he and his wife, Jerrie, looked for anything that survived the flames in the house they leased in the Sunrise Village subdivision.

Little did he know. "That's the way I like my pork chops, well done," said Morelock's son, Brett, as he pulled cooked meat from the inside of a freezer turned into an oven by the flames.

What once had been bottles of wine were puddles of melted glass. Nothing was left of a water bed but the concrete piers that had held it up.

Don Morelock found a tin sheriff's star that once had been part of a costume, held it to his chest, then dropped it in the ashes.

Morelock said he and his wife had watched the fire approach the back of their home before they fled with the few

family pictures and other mementos they could gather in a hurry.

"The wind was incredible," Morelock said of the turbulence created by the fire. "I told one fellow the sound was like a thousand horses running by."

Morman said many of the houses that burned had shake roofs, which easily caught fire as the flames roared through the trees standing nearby.

"At the time we built six years ago, you had to have a shake roof, and they didn't want any lawn around the place," said Pat Thomas, whose house in Sunrise village burned to the ground. He said the requirements were in the homeowners' association by-laws.

Morman said those are just the kinds of things the Department of Forestry recommends against as more people build houses in the forest, where they are vulnerable to forest fires.

"Shake roofs in a forest environment just don't cut it," Morman said. "I'm sure people here have learned that lesson."

Morman said the 2,800 people who evacuated from 2,000 households Saturday night were allowed back to their homes Monday morning. Authorities reopened major streets in the fire area, including the road leading to the Mount Bachelor ski resort.

Sightseers will be kept out a couple of days to hold down traffic as firefighters continued to move equipment around, Morman added.

The cause of the fire remained under investigation, but Morman said arson had been ruled out.

The fire began near Shevlin Park, a popular spot for weddings three miles west of Bend. It burned south for 12 miles, jumping the 75-foot width of the Deschutes River.

By Monday, much of the smoke had cleared, leaving the sky blue again as helicopters continued to ferry huge buckets of water to dump on hot spots.

A total of 1,435 people, 122 fire engines, 70 bulldozers, 12 helicopters and six air tankers were working the fire, said Department of Forestry spokesman Don Ferguson.

Although firefighters seemed to be getting the upper hand on the blaze, a National Weather Service meteorologist warned

state and federal agencies Monday that more hot weather was in the forecast.

"It's a very volatile situation as far as the weather goes," Terry Marsha said at the briefing in Salem. "We've got hot and dry conditions and now we're going to have to sit around and wait for thunderstorms, unfortunately."

"It's going to be a pretty hairy week, just sitting around and wondering when these things are going to hit."

State Forestry Department spokesman Doug Decker said at the meeting that this summer has the makings to be one of the worst fire seasons on record.

"Right now we're seeing fire conditions as bad as we've ever seen them," he said. "We could well be into one of the worst fire seasons we've had in a long time."

Meanwhile, the Finley Butte fire grew to more than 1,250 acres on the Deschutes National Forest. That blaze was six miles east of La Pine near Newberry Crater and about 25 miles south of Bend.

People were evacuated Sunday from campgrounds and vacation homes around East Lake and Paulina Lake, located inside the collapsed volcano, said U.S. Forest Service spokeswoman Carrie Sammon.

By Monday, the fire had slowed and was burning east and southeast away from the crater and fire officials were considering reopening the road serving the area, she said. About 200 firefighters were on the fire.

Fire lines were completed Monday morning around a 50-acre fire just outside the community of Chiloquin, on U.S. Highway 97 about 110 miles south of Bend.

Massive retardant drops by air tankers helped contain two small fires along the Rogue River 13 miles northwest of Grants Pass. The area is popular with rafters.

The Hellsgate fire was contained at 68 acres, while the Hog Creek fire was contained at six acres, Decker said.

Authorities were afraid the fires would take off in the steep timbered country, so they had five air tankers flying round robin and put 72,000 gallons of retardant on the flames, he said.

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