

Bootleg fire grows, forces evacuation of wildlife station

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

PORTLAND — The nation's largest wildfire torched more dry forest in Oregon and forced the evacuation of a wildlife research station Monday as firefighters had to retreat from the flames for the ninth consecutive day due to erratic and dangerous fire behavior.

Firefighters were forced to pull back as flames, pushed by winds and fueled by bone-dry conditions, jumped fire-retardant containment lines and pushed up to 4 miles into new territory, authorities said.

The destructive Bootleg fire in south-central Oregon is just north of the California border and grew to more than 476 square miles, an area about the size of Los Angeles.

Fire crews were also rushing to corral multiple "slop fires" — patches of flames that escaped fire lines meant to contain the blaze — before they grew in size. One of those smaller fires was already nearly 4 square miles in size. Thunderstorms with dry lightning were possible Monday as well, heightening the dangers.

"We are running fire-fighting operations through the day and all through the night," said Joe Hessel, incident commander. "This fire is



The Bootleg fire burns at night in southern Oregon on Saturday.

a real challenge, and we are looking at sustained battle for the foreseeable future."

On Monday, the fire reached the southern edge of Sycan Marsh, a privately owned wetland that hosts thousands of migrating birds and is a key research station on wetland restoration.

The blaze, which was 25% contained, has burned at least 67 homes and 100 buildings while threatening thousands more in a remote landscape of forests, lakes and wildlife refuges.

At the other end of the state, a fire in the mountains of northeast Oregon grew to nearly 19 square miles.

The Elbow Creek fire that started Thursday has prompted evacuations in several small, rural communities around the Grande Ronde River about 30 miles southeast of Walla Walla, Washington. It was 10% contained.

Natural features of the area act like a funnel for wind, feeding the flames and making them unpredictable, officials said.

In California, a growing wildfire south of Lake Tahoe jumped a highway, prompting more evacuation orders, the closure of the Pacific Crest Trail and the cancellation of an extreme bike ride through the Sierra Nevada.

The Tamarack fire, which was sparked by lightning on July 4, had charred about 36 square miles of dry brush and timber as of Monday. Crews were improving a line protecting Markleeville, a small town close to the California-Nevada state line. It has

destroyed at least two structures, authorities said.

About 500 fire personnel were battling the flames Sunday, "focusing on preserving life and property with point protection of structures and putting in containment lines where possible," the U.S. Forest Service said.

Meteorologists predicted critically dangerous fire weather with lightning possible through at least Monday in both California and southern Oregon.

"With the very dry fuels, any thunderstorm has the potential to ignite new fire starts," the National Weather Service in Sacramento, California, said on Twitter.

Extremely dry conditions and heat waves tied to climate change have swept the region, making wildfires harder to fight. Climate change has made the West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

Firefighters said in July they were facing conditions more typical of late summer or fall.

Northern California's Dixie fire roared to new life Sunday, prompting new evacuation orders in rural communities near the Feather River Canyon. The wildfire, near

the 2018 site of the deadliest U.S. blaze in recent memory, was 15% contained and covered 39 square miles. The fire is northeast of the town of Paradise, California, and survivors of that horrific fire that killed 85 people watched warily as the new blaze burned.

Pacific Gas & Electric equipment may have been involved in the start of the Dixie fire, the nation's largest utility reported to California regulators.

PG&E said in a report Sunday to the California Public Utilities Commission that a repair man responding to a circuit outage on July 13 spotted blown fuses in a conductor atop a pole, a tree leaning into the conductor and fire at the base of the tree.

The Dixie fire has grown to nearly 47 square miles, largely in remote wilderness. The utility said investigators with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection have collected equipment from the location.

PG&E equipment has repeatedly been linked to major wildfires, including a 2018 fire that ravaged the town of Paradise and killed 85 people.

At least 16 major fires were burning in the Pacific Northwest alone, according to the Forest Service.

Number of unhealthy air days in state increases as wildfires grow

PROTECT YOURSELF AGAINST POOR AIR QUALITY

- If possible, stay inside, close windows or use air conditioners (if you have them) with the intake closed. Also, run a high-efficiency particulate air filter, or an electro-static precipitator.
- If you don't have air conditioning and it's too hot to stay indoors with the windows closed, find a clean-air space in your community, such as a library, shopping mall or community center. If poor air quality continues overnight, you may need to book a hotel room, or stay with a friend who has air conditioning.
- Don't use anything that burns, like candles or gas stoves. And don't smoke cigarettes indoors, which contributes to the already poor air quality.
- Refrain from vacuuming or doing other activities that stir up dust.
- The American Lung Association recommends placing damp towels under doors or in other crevices where polluted air might leak in.
- Don't rely on masks for protection. Most non-medical grade masks won't protect lungs from the fine particulates of wildfire smoke. Bandanas are equally ineffective.
- Although respirators, like those labeled "NIOSH" and the rating of N95 or N100, can protect against smoke, they must be properly fitted by a trained professional and are in scarce supply due to the coronavirus pandemic. Officials also have urged that these masks be reserved for medical and other frontline workers.
- Ultimately, the agency recommends limiting exposure to smoky air as much as possible.
- Avoid outdoor activities, especially exercise, when air quality is unhealthy and hazardous.
- Asthma sufferers or those with other respiratory problems should follow their breathing management plans or talk to their doctors. Have an adequate supply of medication on hand (the Oregon Health Authority recommends a five-day supply).
- If you spend time in a car, turn the air conditioning on recirculate.

— Oregon Health Authority

By KALE WILLIAMS
The Oregonian

In what will come as a surprise to few Oregonians who have endured the past two wildfire seasons, the state is experiencing an increasing number of days with poor air quality.

An annual report on smoke trends in Oregon, released last week, drove home that reality.

"Wildfires are becoming larger and more frequent across the Western U.S., which is causing more smoky days with poor air quality," said Ali Mirzakhali, Air Quality Division administrator for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, which produces the report.

"Increasing wildfire smoke from Oregon, as well as California, Idaho, Washington and even British Columbia, means more communities across the state are now experiencing higher concentrations of (particulate matter)," Mirzakhali said in a statement.

The report looked at 24 locations across the state, including Bend, Medford, Klamath Falls and Portland, where the state monitors air quality and divides it into six categories: good, moderate, unhealthy for sensitive groups, unhealthy, very unhealthy and hazardous.

The report found that 2020 actually had a shorter wildfire season than the average year, but air quality plummeted in the months after massive blazes erupted across the state after the Labor Day windstorm.

Concentrations of fine particulate matter, known as PM2.5, were "measured higher during September and October 2020 than any other time since DEQ began monitoring air quality in 1985," the agency said.

But it wasn't just last year, according to the state.

"Overall trends indicate that the number of days in which air quality measures 'Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups or Worse,' as well as concentrations of PM 2.5, are continuing to increase," the

report said.

From 1987 to 2014, Bend saw just three days with air quality rated as "unhealthy." From 2015 and 2020, the central Oregon city recorded 13 days with "unhealthy" air, five days with "very unhealthy" air and six days with air designated in the worst category of "hazardous."

Klamath Falls, which is under an air quality advisory from smoke produced by the huge Bootleg fire burning to the northeast of the city, saw a similar increase. The large

est population center in southeastern Oregon saw 20 days of "unhealthy" air before 2015. In the years since, it has seen 37.

Before the September firestorm of 2020, Portland had never recorded air quality worse than "unhealthy." Last year, Oregon's largest city experienced three days of "very unhealthy" air and five days rated as "hazardous." At one point in the midst of the fires, Portland had the worst air quality of any major city in the world.

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