

Deadly California fires explode again

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and JOCELYN GECKER
Associated Press

SANTA ROSA, Calif. — Fueled by the return of strong winds, the wildfires burning through California wine country exploded in size and number Wednesday as authorities issued new evacuation orders and the death toll climbed to 21 — a figure that was expected to rise higher still.

Three days after the fires began, firefighters were still unable to gain control of the blazes that had turned entire Northern California neighborhoods to ash and destroyed at least 3,500 homes and businesses.

“We are literally looking at explosive vegetation,” said Ken Pimlott, chief of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. “It is very dynamic. These fires are changing by the minute in many areas.”

The entire historic town of Calistoga, population 5,000, was evacuated. In neighboring Sonoma County, authorities issued an evacuation advisory for the northern part of the town of Sonoma and the community of Boyes Hot Springs. By the time the advisory was issued, lines of cars were already fleeing.

“That’s very bad,” resident Nick Hinman said when a deputy sheriff warned him that the driving winds could shift the wildfires toward the town of Sonoma proper, with 11,000 residents. “It’ll go up like a candle.”

Ash snowed over the Sonoma Valley, covering windshields, as winds began picking up toward the potentially disastrous forecast speed of 30 mph. Cars of evacuees raced away from the flames while countless emergency vehicles raced toward them, sirens blaring. Residents manhandled canvas bags into cars



AP Photo/Eric Risberg

A Cal Fire official looks out at the remains of the Journey’s End mobile home park Wednesday in Santa Rosa, California. Blazes burning in Northern California have become some of the deadliest in state history.

Hundreds missing; loved ones go online

SANTA ROSA, Calif. (AP) — Friends and relatives desperately checked hospitals and shelters and pleaded on social media for help finding loved ones missing amid California’s wildfires, with hundreds of people unaccounted for Wednesday.

“We’ve been to 17 evacuation centers. We’ve called probably 12 hospitals. I mean, my whole family, all my friends looking for her,” Jessica Tunis said as she searched for her mother, who was last heard saying “I’m going to die” before the phone at her burning mobile home in Santa Rosa went dead.

Hours later Wednesday, the daughter texted a reporter to say that the remains of her mother, 69-year-old Linda Tunis, had been found in the ruins of her home.

As of Wednesday, 22 wildfires were burning in Northern California, up from 17 the day before. The blazes killed at least 21 people and destroyed an estimated 3,500

homes and businesses, many of them in California wine country.

How many people were missing was unclear, and officials said the lists could include duplicated names and people who are safe but haven’t told anyone, whether because of the general confusion or because cellphone service is out across wide areas.

“We get calls and people searching for lost folks and they’re not lost, they’re just staying with somebody and we don’t know where it is,” said Napa County Supervisor Brad Wagenknecht.

With many fires still raging out of control, authorities said locating the missing was not their priority.

Sonoma County Sheriff Robert Giordano put the number of people unaccounted for in the hard-hit county at 380 and said officers were starting limited searches in the “cold zones” they could reach.

worst was far from over.

“Make no mistake, this is a serious, critical, catastrophic event,” Pimlott said. The fires have burned through a staggering 265 square miles of urban and rural areas. High winds and low humidity made conditions ideal for fire on the start virtually anywhere on ground that was parched from years of drought.

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection spokesman Daniel Berlant said 22 wildfires were burning Wednesday, up from 17 the day before. As the fires grow, officials voiced concern that separate fires would merge into even larger infernos.

“We have had big fires in the past. This is one of the biggest, most serious, and it’s not over,” Gov. Jerry Brown said at a

jammed with possessions or filled their gas tanks. The wildfires ranked as the third deadliest and most destructive in state history. And officials warned the

Report: Key changes needed to prevent fiery rail crashes

By JOAN LOWY
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A prestigious scientific organization on Wednesday called for more frequent and better inspections of freight railroad tracks to prevent potentially catastrophic oil and ethanol train crashes.

A report by the National Academies of Sciences also urged better training for emergency workers and questioned the validity of recent train speed regulation.

From 2005 to 2015, there were 21 derailments or collisions in the U.S. of trains hauling crude oil, resulting in the release of 1.6 million gallons. There were 58 ethanol train crashes over the same period, resulting in the release of 2.6 million gallons. The trains are often more than 100 cars long, and spilled oil or ethanol from ruptured tank



AP Photo/Rockford Register Star, Scott Morgan, File

In this June 21, 2009 file photo, railroad freight cars are destroyed after a fiery explosion that killed one person are next to the train tracks following a derailment June 19 in Rockford, Ill.

cars has ignited and created giant fireballs that can last for days.

Several derailments were attributed to track problems that weren’t detected in inspections shortly before the incidents. Federal regulations presume that inspectors won’t

always catch all track problems, but the report questions whether there should be an acceptable failure rate. It suggests that these rates and priorities for track repair be adjusted for routes used by trains hauling crude oil and ethanol.

The government should encourage railroads to make more frequent and comprehensive inspections of track on routes regularly used by oil and ethanol trains, including the use of advances in inspection technologies like sensors, high-resolution imaging and autonomous systems, the report said. Some railroads are using drones to increase track inspections.

Derailments of all kinds reached an all-time low in 2016, said Jessica Kahanek, a spokeswoman for the Association of American Railroads. Derailments involving crude oil account for less than 1 percent of all derailments, she said.

Railroads are already using many of the technologies mentioned in the report and are doing extensive research on ways “to make a safe network even safer,” Kahanek said.

The report also questioned the technical basis for a recent safety regulation that reduced the maximum speed for oil trains to 50 mph in most areas and 40 mph in urban areas.

Of the 20 most serious train wrecks in which oil and ethanol were released in the United States from 2005 to 2015, none of the trains were traveling faster than 50 mph and only six were traveling at 40 mph or more, the report said.

Some safety advocates favor a 30 mph limit. The railroad industry opposes the lower speed, saying it would cause traffic jams and shipping delays.

Emergency responders in many of the communities traversed by oil and ethanol trains, especially volunteer fire departments in rural areas, still lack familiarity with procedures for handling a large-scale incident involving

highly flammable liquids, the report said.

It recommended that emergency preparedness grants be used to assist “communities that are facing new and unfamiliar risks.”

Clear guidelines are also lacking on the kinds of information railroads should provide state and local agencies to prepare for such emergencies, the report said. And it’s unclear if the information railroads are sharing with state emergency planning agencies is getting to first responders.

Oil and ethanol train derailments continue, although the pace has slowed. In June, 20 cars of a 115-car oil train derailed while passing through Plainfield, Illinois on its way to Louisiana. A tank car leaked 20,000 gallons of crude oil, most of which burned, following a collision in April between two trains near Money, Mississippi.

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