

Fire destroys historic California town

Winds propel Dixie fire through Greenville

By Noah Berger

Associated Press

GREENVILLE, Calif. — A 3-week-old wildfire engulfed a Northern California mountain town, leaving much of the downtown in ashes, while a new wind-whipped blaze also destroyed homes as crews braced for another explosive run of flames Thursday, Aug. 5 in the midst of dangerous weather.

The Dixie Fire, swollen by bone-dry vegetation and 40 mph gusts, raged through the northern Sierra Nevada town of Greenville on Wednesday evening, Aug. 4. A gas station, hotel and bar were among many fixtures gutted in the town, which dates to California's Gold Rush era and has some structures more than a century old.

It wasn't immediately known how many buildings were demolished, but photos and video from the scene indicate the destruction was widespread.

"We lost Greenville tonight," U.S. Rep. Doug LaMalfa, who represents the area, said in an emotional Facebook video. "There's just no words."

As the fire's north and eastern sides exploded, the Plumas County Sheriff's Office issued a Facebook posting warning the town's approximately 800 residents: "You are in imminent danger and you MUST leave now!"

The growing blaze that broke out July 21 was the state's largest wildfire and had blackened over 504 square miles. It had burned dozens of homes before making its new run.

"We did everything we could," fire spokesman Mitch Matlow said. "Sometimes it's just not enough."

About 100 miles to the south, officials said between 35 and 40 homes and other structures burned in the fast-moving River Fire that broke out Wednesday near Colfax, a town of about 2,000

residents. Within hours it ripped through nearly 4 square miles of dry brush and trees. There was no containment and about 6,000 people were under evacuation orders across Placer and Nevada counties, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Early in the week, some 5,000 firefighters had made progress on the Dixie Fire, saving some threatened homes, bulldozing pockets of unburned vegetation and managing to surround a third of the perimeter.

More fire engines and bulldozers were being ordered to bolster the fight, Matlow said. On Wednesday, the fire grew by thousands of acres and an additional 4,000 people were ordered to evacuate, bringing nearly 26,500 people in several counties under evacuation orders, he said.

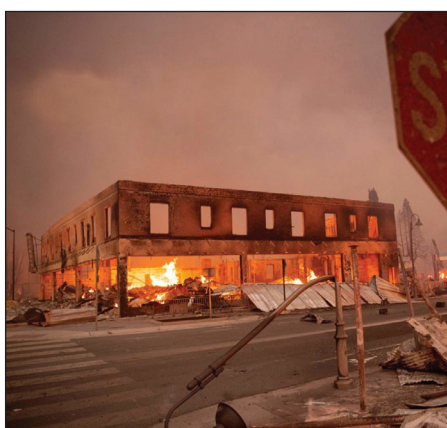
Red flag weather conditions of high heat, low humidity and gusty afternoon and evening winds erupted Wednesday and were expected to be a continued threat.

Winds were expected to change direction multiple times on Thursday, putting pressure on firefighters at sections of the fire that haven't seen activity in several days, officials said.

The trees, grass and brush were so dry that "if an ember lands, you're virtually guaranteed to start a new fire," Matlow said.

The Dixie Fire was running parallel to a canyon area that served as a chimney, making it so hot that it created enormous pyrocumulus columns of smoke. These clouds bring chaotic winds, making a fire "critically erratic" so it's hard to predict the direction of growth, he added.

Dawn Garofalo fled with a dog and two horses from a friend's mountain property, and watched the soaring cloud grow from the west side of Lake Almanor.



Josh Edelson/AFP via Getty Images-TNS

Buildings are left in ruin as the Dixie fire tears through downtown Greenville, California on Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021.

"There's only one way in and one way out," she said Wednesday. "I didn't want to be stuck up there if the fire came through."

And about 150 miles to the west of the Dixie Fire, the lightning-sparked McFarland Fire threatened remote homes along the Trinity River in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. The fire was only 7% contained after burning through nearly 33 square miles of drought-stricken vegetation.

Similar risky weather was expected across Southern California, where heat advisories and warnings were issued for interior valleys, mountains and deserts for much of the week.

Heat waves and historic drought tied to climate change have made wildfires harder to fight in America's West. Scientists say climate change has made the region much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

More than 20,000 firefighters and support personnel were battling 97 large, active wildfires covering 2,919 square miles in 13 U.S. states, the National Interagency Fire Center said.

Rain aids in keeping city water use down

By Jayson Jacoby

jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

The afternoon and evening thundershowers that punctuated the past week in Baker City helped keep water use lower than it has been for much of the previously hot, dry summer.

Michelle Owen, the city's public works director, is pleased with the trend.

But with several weeks of summer still to come, and warmer temperatures forecast for much of next week, she's still concerned.

"While the reduced use is helpful, it doesn't change my overall concern for the year and for moving into next year," Owen said on Thursday, Aug. 5. "I believe these drought conditions are more expansive and one cooler, rainy week is good, but doesn't solve the water use concerns."

The correlation between weather and water use is a predictable one, Owen said.

When nature supplies the irrigation water for lawns and gardens, residents generally use less city water — quite a lot less, in some cases.

During June, the city

averaged about 4.3 million gallons per day, and during July about 4.8 million gallons.

Rainfall during those two months totaled just 0.23 of an inch at the Baker City Airport, more than an inch and a half below average.

But during the first five days of August, rainfall at the airport added up to 0.47 of an inch — twice the total for the previous two months.

The city's water use, meanwhile, dropped to a daily average of just under 3.3 million gallons for those five days.

That includes 2.9 million gallons on Thursday, Aug. 5 — the lowest daily total since spring.

Owen said in July that she hopes residents will voluntarily curb water use so the city can avoid having to move to phase 3 of its water curtailment ordinance, under which all outdoor watering is banned.

The city has been under phase 2 since July 12. It calls for residents to voluntarily limit outdoor watering to between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m., when evaporation rates are lower and less water is needed to irrigate lawns and gardens.

US plans 50% more wild horse roundups amid Western drought

By Scott Sonner

Associated Press

RENO, Nev. — U.S. land managers have begun efforts to capture about 50% more wild horses than originally planned this year because of severe drought across the U.S. West — about 6,000 additional animals primarily in Nevada, Oregon and Colorado.

The Bureau of Land Management said the emergency roundups that began Sunday in Oregon and Monday in Nevada concentrate on places where "chronic overpopulation" of the herds "already has stretched the available food and water to its limits."

"As one of the agencies charged with the responsibility to protect and manage America's wild horses and burros, the BLM is prepared to take emergency action where we can in order to save the lives of these cherished animals," said Nada Wolff Culver, the bureau's deputy director for policy and programs.

The agency is committed to "continuing our efforts to reduce overpopulation across the West and achieve healthy, sustainable herd sizes that are more capable of withstanding severe conditions, including prolonged drought, which are becoming more frequent due to climate change," she said in announcing the effort Monday.

Horse advocates say the emergency roundups that will continue into September are being driven by pressure from ranchers who don't want the mustangs competing with their livestock for limited forage and water.

One advocate said she's especially disappointed the Biden administration is continuing the policies of former President Donald Trump and previous administrations that prioritized removal of horses that are federally protected without reining in the number of cattle and sheep grazing on the same land.

"Profit-driven interests



Hector Amezcua/Sacramento Bee/TNS, File

Wild horses in a corral after being captured in Lassen County, California, in August 2010.

ravage the landscape, and we blame the horse," said Laura Leigh, president of the nonprofit group Wild Horse Education.

"Absolutely nothing has changed under the Biden administration except we are being spoon-fed a dose of greenwash that they 'care' about the environment and wild things," she said.

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association said ranchers already have made voluntary changes to reduce and rotate grazing on federal lands during a drought "more pervasive and dramatic than we have seen in years," said Kaitlynn Glover, the association's executive director of resources.

"These removals are critical for the horses as well as the health of the rangelands," she said in an email to The Associated Press. "Even in times where resources are plentiful, these overpopulated herds cause serious damage to the landscape."

The bureau already has gathered 1,200 animals this year and originally intended to round up about 12,000. The new effort would push the total to about 18,000 across 10 Western states from Montana to California.

The bureau says the estimated 86,000 free-roaming mustangs and burros on federal lands is three times what the ecosystem can sustain, something that animal advocates dispute.

About 1,400 that are rounded up would be returned to the range after

they receive contraceptive drugs. But the total rounded up would be more than double the 9,181 gathered last year.

The previous peak over the past decade was 9,749 in 2018. Fewer than 4,100 were gathered annually from 2013 through 2017.

Culver noted that the land agency announced last week that it was taking additional steps to ensure that captured horses made available for public adoption do not end up in the hands of secondhand buyers who ship them to slaughterhouses.

That move drew mixed reactions from horse advocates, who welcomed efforts to tighten regulations but said the reforms don't go far enough and that horses will still end up being slaughtered as long as the government offers \$1,000 cash incentives to adopt the animals.

Neda DeMayo, president of Return to Freedom Wild Horse Conservation, said the crisis on the range is the result of the Bureau of Land Management's "failure to implement solutions that have been available for over 20 years," including accelerated use of fertility control programs.

U.S. Rep. Dina Titus, a Nevada Democrat, agreed.

"This situation further illustrates that the status quo does not work," Titus said. "That is why I led an effort to provide funding in this year's Interior appropriations bill for safe and humane birth control."

COVID

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The next day he went to Saint Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City. He said he was told he had a sinus infection.

Carlos said he thought at the time that he had contracted COVID-19, because his symptoms were much more severe than he had had with colds.

"I felt a million times worse than any cold I have ever had," he said.

Carlos returned to the home he shared with Trinidad, Mary, Donna and Greg. Chuck Brown, 63, said Donna was the next person to get sick.

Donna and Trinidad were taken by LifeFlight helicopter to Saint Alphonsus Hospital in Boise on July 7, Chuck said.

Trinidad tested positive that day.

Mary, who tested positive on July 8, was taken to the Boise hospital later in the month after spending about a week in the Baker City hospital.

Among the five members of the household, Carlos was the only one fully vaccinated, Chuck Brown said.

Donna had her first dose of the Moderna vaccine (which

requires two doses) in February, but she suffers from lupus, and Chuck Brown said the inoculation caused a flare up in her condition, so she did not receive a second shot.

Neither Mary, Trinidad nor Greg was vaccinated.

Although Donna spent two days in the hospital after contracting COVID-19, she has since recovered, something her siblings, Chuck and Hope, who's 52, attribute to her being partially vaccinated.

Greg Valentine spent about 10 days in the Baker City hospital after he developed pneumonia, Hope said.

Chuck and Hope said they understood that their mother was much more vulnerable to the virus due to her age — about 74% of the 2,877 Oregonians who have died after testing positive were 70 or older, and 50% were 80 or older.

But they said Mary rarely left her house, and she believed she was protected as a result.

"That was not the case," Chuck said.

Chuck, who has lived in Baker City since 1971, said he tried to shelter his mother by, for instance, leaving her groceries on her back door rather than entering her home after doing her shopping.

He said he felt more

confident after getting both doses of the Moderna vaccine in March.

Hope, who lives in Indiana, was fully vaccinated in April, receiving two doses of the Moderna vaccine. She said she decided to get vaccinated despite having contracted COVID-19 twice, once in September 2020 in Indiana and again this March in Texas. She traveled to Baker City in early July to help Chuck care for their mother and their other relatives.

Both credit their vaccination with protecting them from COVID-19 while they were spending time in a household where five people had been infected.

"I was with them every day trying to take care of them," Chuck said.

Hope said both she and Chuck wore masks while caring for their mother and other relatives, even though both siblings are vaccinated and, in Hope's case, she has antibodies from being infected.

Hope said she wishes more people who are eligible to be vaccinated — vaccines aren't yet approved for children younger than 12 — will get the shots.

"Look what happened — we lost two people in one household," she said. "And it could have been even worse."

FIRES

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Peterson said she thinks it's likely that some of those "sleeper" fires will show up over the next several days, as hotter, drier weather is forecast for much of next week.

Fire managers will be taking daily airplane flights over the region to check for new blazes, she said.

They will pay particular attention to places where fire crews didn't find blazes that had been reported, Peterson said. There were several of those in the region this week.

Joel McCraw, fire management officer for the Wallawa-Whitman National Forest's Whitman Ranger District, agreed with Peterson about the likelihood of sleeper fires.

"We've taken a ton of lightning, but we also got some pretty good moisture," McCraw said.

He said local agencies are equipped to handle initial attack on relatively small fires.

The challenge, McCraw said, would be if a larger blaze gets going, requiring a management team and large numbers of ground and aerial resources.

"Across the region and nation those resources are pretty scarce right now," he said.

The biggest fire reported in Baker County burned just two acres, on private land near Gimlet Creek and Whitney Valley, about five miles southwest of Sumpter.

Peterson said copious lightning started several fires in Wallawa County, including the Wise fire, which had burned about 130 acres

six miles northwest of Wallawa as of Friday morning, Aug. 6.

The biggest blaze in the region is the Black Butte fire on the Malheur National Forest south of Unity. It had burned 7,645 acres as of Friday morning.

Peterson credits cooperation among the Department of Forestry, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, local rural fire protection districts, and private contractors with keeping new fires small in Baker County.

She emphasized that although the rain and cooler temperatures late this week gave firefighters an assist, the fire danger remains extreme.

"This is not the end of fire season," Peterson said. "We're still in restrictions, with no burning or campfires."