

Forest Fire Threatens Whipple Observatory

July 18 2005

A forest fire sparked by lightning more than a week ago currently is located less than a mile from the Smithsonian's Whipple Observatory. More than 20,000 acres have burned already, and firefighters predict that the fire may grow to 60,000 acres. Observatory personnel were evacuated on Tuesday, July 12.

More than 1000 firefighters are battling the blaze in an effort to protect the irreplaceable scientific resource represented by Whipple Observatory. Approximately \$100 million dollars worth of facilities and equipment are located at the observatory. The MMT Observatory alone, the largest and most valuable telescope on the mountain, hosts hundreds of researchers every year. The MMT is the flagship instrument of the Smithsonian Observatory. It was recently upgraded with a new 6.5-meter mirror and a suite of powerful instruments, including the Megacam imager and Hectospec and Hectochelle spectrographs.

Despite the efforts of the firefighters, it now looks like this fire will sweep around the mountain by Saturday. The firefighters hope to save the telescopes and support buildings, but they cannot guarantee that this will be possible. They have cleared brush and trees from around the buildings and have surrounded the buildings with fire retardant spray.

"We want to thank the firefighters from across the country who are making a courageous effort to protect this valuable national resource," said Charles Alcock, director of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. "We understand that they are going to remain on the mountain to protect the buildings as long as it is safe to do so."

A new team took over firefighting efforts Thursday evening as the fire's priority continued to increase over other statewide brush fires. The new team is continuing to fight the fire at the base of nearby Madera/Josephine Canyons, but they are concerned that they might lose the fight and have to evacuate for crew safety. Once the fire crosses the Canyons, it could reach the observatory within two hours.

Located at Mount Hopkins, 35 miles south of Tucson and just within the boundary of the Coronado National Forest, the Fred Lawrence Whipple Observatory is a leading astronomical research station. A number of telescopes occupy the grounds, the largest of which is the MMT. A joint venture of the Smithsonian Institution and the University of Arizona, this innovative facility was recently converted to house a single 6.5-meter (256-inch) mirror. Also at Whipple Observatory are:

- * 1.5-meter (60-inch) and 1.2-meter (48-inch) reflector telescopes used for solar system, galactic and extragalactic astronomy

- * 1.3-meter (51-inch) PAIRITEL (Peters Automated InfraRed Imaging Telescope) reflector, used for infrared observations, especially of gamma-ray bursts, supernovae and other variable sources

- * 10-meter optical gamma-ray telescope

- * IOTA (Infrared-Optical Telescope Array) telescopes, used for optical and infrared interferometry

- * HAT (Hungarian Automated Telescope) network of optical refractor telescopes, used for robotic observations of the night sky

- * equipment for the 12-meter VERITAS (Very Energetic Radiation Imaging Telescope Array System) optical gamma-ray telescope

Headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics (CfA) is a joint collaboration between the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory and the Harvard College Observatory. CfA scientists organized into seven research divisions study the origin, evolution, and ultimate fate of the universe.

Source: Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics

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