

Endangered species hit hard by historic Ariz. fire

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists and volunteers use nets to remove two species of trout from a creek in the Chiricahua National Forest near Elfrida, Ariz., in this photo made on June 17, 2011. Unlike some major wildfires that inflict a serious human toll, perhaps the biggest impact from the largest wildfire in Arizona history will fall squarely on an ecosystem that's home to numerous endangered species. (AP Photo/Humberto Rodriguez, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

(AP) -- The largest wildfire in Arizona history left a charred landscape of blackened forest, burned-out vehicle hulks and charred fireplaces as it destroyed more than 30 homes. It also inflicted a serious toll on an ecosystem that's home to numerous endangered species.

The flames spared three packs of endangered Mexican [gray wolves](#) but likely killed at least some threatened Mexican spotted owls as it roared

through more than a half-million acres of a pristine forest on the New Mexico border.

[Wildlife managers](#) are scrambling to determine if they need to pull endangered trout from streams that will soon be clogged with ash. Some other [native species](#) imperiled by another fire already have been removed because of concern the streams would be silted over from the runoff.

The effect of the human-caused Wallow fire will last for decades because it burned so hot in many areas that it completely denuded the landscape, forest specialists said.

In large areas, it denuded the landscape. Other places saw only undergrowth burn, and spots were untouched. But the places where it burned the fiercest are largely lifeless.

"This is unfortunate in that this is such a hot fire," said Tom Buckley, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife spokesman. "The natural fires are good for a healthy forest, but these fires - where the debris has been allowed to build up and it just hasn't been addressed - they come out very hot and just scorch everything. As soon as the monsoon shows up, there's a potential for a lot of soil to move."

Forest managers are warning people who have homes in the White Mountains to get flood insurance immediately because summer storms are expected to create severe runoff from the denuded landscape.

It's part of the steep human cost from the 832-square-mile blaze that continues to churn through thousands of additional acres per day in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest.

The fire destroyed 32 homes and four rental cabins. The charred

skeletons of vacation homes are physical reminders of disrupted lives and bygone memories. For many Arizona desert dwellers, the mountains provided an escape from the heat for generations.

The Wallow fire was 61 percent contained on Thursday but still slowly growing on the south and southeast flanks. Only one small inhabited area remains threatened, and more than 10,000 people who had fled their homes earlier are not home.

Two other major fires are burning in the state. The 44-square-mile Monument fire near the southern Arizona city of Sierra Vista was 59 percent contained but has destroyed 57 homes. Authorities lifted an evacuation order for an estimated 200 to 300 homes Thursday. About 300 homes remain evacuated. The 348-square-mile Horseshoe Two fire atop southeastern Arizona's Chiricahua mountains is 95 percent contained after destroying nine homes in the world-renowned bird watching area.

The three wolf packs in the Apache-Sitgreaves all had pups and were in or near their dens when the huge fire that broke out on May 29 roared through, said Jim Paxon, a spokesman for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Firefighters on the ground have seen two of the packs moving around with their pups. Radio collars on the three adults in the third pack show they are alive, but the status of their pups remains unknown because they are in an area still too hot for ground crews to enter. But Paxon said he believed the third set of pups survived.

"They're there, and functioning, and able to persist and take care of their pups," Paxon said. "We feel very confident that our wolves are out there and they've all got pups, and that's a good thing."

The Fish and Wildlife Service said Thursday it had not confirmed the pups survived.

The wolves were reintroduced into Arizona and New Mexico beginning in 1998. Managers had hoped to have more than 100 in the wild by 2006, but the count stood at 42 at the beginning of 2010. The program has been hampered by illegal shootings, court battles, complaints from ranchers who have lost livestock and pets to wolves, and concerns by environmentalists over the way the program has been managed. Six wolves died last year, all but one involving suspicious circumstances.

The spotted owls are another matter.

Crown fires in overgrown forests have become the greatest cause of unusual losses for the birds, and 73 protected nesting areas were burned in the fire, said Beth Humphrey, the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest biologist. There are only 145 protected nest sites in the entire 2.1 million acres forest. More likely burned in the Gila National Forests when fire crossed into New Mexico, she said.

Any nestlings or eggs caught in the fire were surely lost, although mortality among adults was likely limited, Humphrey said.

"We don't know the severity of the impacts of those owl sites," Buckley said. "Fires don't burn evenly, so we have a lot of hope that some survived."

Fish and Wildlife also is looking to see if prey for the wolves and owls will return quickly enough to let the animals stay in their regular areas.

The burned forest supports more than a dozen endangered or threatened species besides the wolves and owls, including snails, frogs and fish. Dozens of other species that aren't rare, including bear, deer, antelope and a herd of elk that at about 6,000 is among the biggest in the state, make their homes in the forest.

Only two dead elk have been found, Paxon said. A yearling calf had to be euthanized because its hooves were badly burned. But rumors of pipes of dead elk simply aren't true, he said.

"These ungulates, the elk and the deer and the antelope, they're a whole lot smarter than people are when it comes to evacuations," Paxon said. "When they feel heat, they will move away from heat toward a cooler area, and generally that's perpendicular to the way the fire's going. If it's not a huge fire, they often circle around and come back in. If it is a pretty widespread fire front, they simply get out in front of that and go over the hill into the next drainage."

The next round of damage will come once summer rains hit. The National Weather Service is warning of major flash floods and debris flows even with a 15-minute-long moderate downpour.

A 23-square-mile fire outside Flagstaff, Ariz., last June led to severe flooding from summer rains that inundated more than 80 homes and led to the drowning death of a 12-year-old girl.

The flooding from the Wallow will kill fish, since it will carry major flows of ash and sediment and clog streams. Decades-long efforts to restore endangered Apache and Gila trout to the streams that flow from the mountain will be hurt.

Already, plans are being made to pull pure Apache trout from streams where it is expected they will die, to preserve the lineage, said Julie Meka Carter, native trout conservation coordinator for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. They could be put in other streams or placed in hatcheries for as long as three years, until the ash and sediment flows subside.

The Apache trout were among the first species listed when the

Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973. Once limited to just 30 miles of streams, they are now found in 29 streams over 120 miles in Arizona's Black River and Little Colorado River watersheds.

Some fish already have been relocated, with Fish and Wildlife officials netting 150 Mexican stonerollers and 125 Yaqui longfin dace from streams that will be affected by the Horseshoe Two fire. The species are native to Arizona, although not listed as threatened or endangered.

"The forest will be very changed, very, very different," said Apache-Sitgreaves forest supervisor Chris Knopp.

The challenge over the next five or more years will be to replace and rebuild the infrastructure: roads, recreational facilities, cattle fences, water supplies, fisheries.

"It's just going to be a tremendous challenge for the forest and the community to work on rebuilding that. And there will be urgency to that. As you've seen up in Flagstaff, if you let this go for any length of time, you're going to have floods, we're going to have that no matter how fast we move in that area," Knopp said.

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