

Los Alamos evacuation order lifted; 12,000 go home

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Firefighter Brandon DeLong, left, and Andrew Buus conduct a burnout operation while battling the Las Conchas fire near Los Alamos, N.M., Friday, July 1, 2011. As firefighters held their ground Friday on the flank of the massive wildfire that burned near the nation's premier nuclear weapons laboratory, officials at the lab and in the surrounding town began planning for the return of thousands of residents and employees who fled the area earlier this week. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

(AP) -- A smattering of summer rain gave a boost to firefighters battling a huge forest fire near Los Alamos, giving authorities enough confidence to allow about 12,000 people to return home for the first time in nearly a week.

Residents rolled into town Sunday morning, honking their horns and waving to firefighters as the word got out that the roadblocks were lifted

and the narrow two lane highway cut into the side of a mesa leading to Los Alamos was open. They had fled en masse on Monday as the fast-moving fire approached the city and its nuclear laboratory.

"Thank, you! Thank, You! Thank, you!," yelled Amy Riehl, an assistant manager at the Smith's grocery store as she arrived in Los Alamos to help keep the store open for returning residents.

"It's scary, but all of the resources here this time, they were ready. They did a magnificent job," said Michael Shields, eyes tearing up as he returned home to his apartment in the heart of the town.

The town was last evacuated because of the 2000 Cerro Grande fire. That time, residents returned to a town that had lost 200 homes, several businesses and had to cope with damaged utilities and other county enterprises. This time around, residents were returning to a town that is completely intact, although the fire destroyed 63 homes west of town.

Although the threat to Los Alamos and the nation's premier nuclear research lab had passed, the mammoth wildfire raging in northern New Mexico was still threatening sacred sites of American Indian tribes.

Hundreds of firefighters were working Sunday to contain the 189-square-mile fire as it burned through a canyon on the Santa Clara Pueblo reservation and threatened other pueblos on the Pajarito Plateau.

The area, a stretch of mesas that run more than 15 miles west of Santa Fe, N.M., includes Los Alamos and the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Authorities said the fire, burning for eight days Sunday, has been fueled by an exceptionally dry season in the Southwest and erratic winds.

Crews have managed to keep the fire in Los Alamos Canyon several miles upslope from the federal laboratory, boosting confidence that it no longer posed an immediate threat to the facility or the nearby town. Crews were helped by rain on Saturday afternoon that slowed the fire.

"Hopefully we'll get two to three more days like this and we'll be fine," operations chief Jayson Coil said.

The blaze, the largest ever in New Mexico, reached the Santa Clara Pueblo's watershed in the canyon this week, damaging the area that the tribe considers its birthplace and scorching 20 square miles of tribal forest. Fire operations chief Jerome Macdonald said it was within miles of the centuries-old Puye Cliff Dwellings, a national historic landmark.

Tribes were worried that cabins, pueblos and watersheds could be destroyed.

"We were also praying on our knees, we were asking the Creator in our cultural way to please forgive us, 'What have we done?'" Santa Clara Pueblo Gov. Walter Dasheno said. "Bring moisture so that the Mother Fire can be stopped. But that was not meant to be."

About 2,800 tribe members live in a dusty village nestled in New Mexico's high desert, near the mouth of Santa Clara Canyon where aspen and blue spruce forests provide relief from the dry desert and ponds provide water for irrigation. The canyon is north of the town of Los Alamos.

Pueblo Fire Chief Mel Tafoya said it was unclear whether cabins in the canyon or the ponds survived the blaze. Members of the state's congressional delegation have promised federal help for the tribe pending a damage assessment.

The tribe also worried that 1.5 million trees planted after the 2000 fire have been destroyed, as well as work to restore the Rio Grande cutthroat trout to the upper headwaters of the Santa Clara Creek. The tribe called for emergency federal relief.

To Santa Clara's south, Cochiti Pueblo was also worried about damage to ground cover affecting its watershed.

Archaeological sites at the northern end of the blaze at Bandelier National Monument hold great significance to area tribes. About half of the park has burned, Bandelier superintendent Jason Lott said.

Meanwhile, hundreds of lab employees were returning to prepare operations and thousands of experiments for the scientists and technicians who were forced to evacuate days ago. Among the work put on hold were experiments using two supercomputers and studies on extending the life of 1960s-era nuclear bombs.

Employees were checking filters in air handling systems to ensure they weren't affected by smoke and restarting computer systems shut down when the lab closed.

"Once we start operation phases for the laboratory, it will take about two days to bring everyone back and have the laboratory fully operational," Lab Director Charles McMillan said.

The blaze remained in Los Alamos Canyon, which runs past the old Manhattan Project site and a 1940s-era dump site of low-level radioactive waste, as well as the site of a nuclear reactor that was demolished in 2003.

Firefighters had planned to burn out areas near homes west of the town to remove combustible material and ensure the fire doesn't creep through

an area burned in a 2000 blaze, but the rain kept the fire away, Coil said.

For returning Los Alamos residents Leo and Lorene Beckstead, their first stop was the grocery store to buy fruits, vegetables and milk as they prepared to heed officials' request that returning residents remain home because of the firefighters battling the blaze the continues to burn north, south, and west of the town.

"They did a great job," Leo Beckstead said of the firefighters. "I think because of the Cerro Grande [fire](#), they learned a lot."

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