

Oregon wildfire causes evacuations in prime eclipse zone

August 19 2017, by Gillian Flaccus

Residents of more than 400 homes in a prime eclipse-viewing location in Oregon were ordered to evacuate Friday because of a rapidly growing wildfire that had already closed access to a portion of a wilderness area and a regional highway.

The late afternoon order threatened to create more tie-ups on rural and narrow roads already expected to be burdened with up to 200,000 visitors coming to the area from all over the world to watch Monday's total solar eclipse. About 1 million people are expected in Oregon, where the moon's shadow first makes landfall in the continental U.S.

The nearly 11-square-mile (28-square-kilometer) wildfire in the Deschutes National Forest was about six miles (9 kilometers) west of the town of Sisters, which sits on the southern edge of the 70-mile swath of Oregon where the moon will completely blot out the sun.

Sisters itself will experience 34 seconds of totality and is a popular tourist destination even without an eclipse brewing, but heavy smoke and the rapidly growing fire have prompted officials to close nearby campsites, recreational areas and roads.

So far fire crews have not been able to contain any part of the wildfire and the McKenzie Pass Highway 242 has been closed between Highway 126 and Sisters, said Susie Heisey, a public information officer with Central Oregon Dispatch.

The closures will likely have a big impact on people traveling through the region for the eclipse, she said, and the risk is high for more conflagrations in the area with so many campers.

"There's absolutely no campfires allowed and no burning allowed. So we're just hoping that everyone that's here to enjoy the eclipse" follows the rules, Heisey said.

Nearly two dozen other fires are also burning in Oregon, including nine more in the best eclipse-viewing zone. Large portions of the Mount Jefferson Wilderness, in central Oregon's Willamette National Forest, are also closed.

Elsewhere, fire officials in Montana ordered additional evacuations Friday night after earlier telling residents of 750 homes to flee a fire that jumped control lines in gusty winds. The 30-square-mile (76 square kilometer) blaze on forest land, southwest of the town of Lolo, was started by lightning in July but blew up late Wednesday.

Two homes burned Friday and several outbuildings burned late Thursday. Evacuations were in effect along the U.S. Highway 93 and U.S. Highway 12 corridors. The town of Florence was under an evacuation warning.

In California, crews fighting a fire in Yosemite National Park were trying to guide the flames away from the small town of Wawona and into wilderness. The fire has closed campgrounds and trails in the park but authorities have not ordered anyone to leave. No structures have been damaged.

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