

Deadly California blaze spawned destructive fire tornado

August 3 2018, by Paul Elias



A resident, in yellow, wishing not to be identified, is comforted after seeing her fire-ravaged home for the first time Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018, in Redding, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

A deadly Northern California wildfire burned so hot in dry and windy conditions that it birthed a record-breaking tornado of flame, officials said Friday.

They also warned of worsening conditions throughout the region.

Winds in the "fire whirl" created July 26 near Redding reached speeds of 143 mph (230 kph), a speed that rivaled some of the most destructive Midwest tornados, National Weather Service meteorologist Duane Dykema said. The whirl uprooted trees and tore roofs from homes, Dykema said.

The whirl measured a 3 on the five-level Enhanced Fujita scale, which scientists use to classify the strength of tornados, he said. California has not recorded a tornado of that strength since 1978.

That fire continues to burn about 100 miles (160 kilometers) south of the Oregon border as firefighters there and throughout Northern California brace for worsening conditions this weekend.

The weather service issued warnings for critical fire weather conditions into Saturday, saying a series of dry low-pressure systems passing through the region would bring afternoon wind gusts.

"This is a particularly dangerous situation with extremely low humidity and high winds. New fires will grow rapidly out of control, in some cases people may not be able to evacuate safely in time should a fire approach," the weather service said in its bulletin for the Mendocino area north of San Francisco.



Redding Police Dept. officer Brian Berg, right, comforts a resident, center, wishing not to be identified, after she saw her fire-ravaged home for the first time Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018, in Redding, Calif. (AP /Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Forecasters said areas with the highest threat include the massive blaze near Redding and two fires burning next to each other around Clearlake about 100 miles (160 kilometers) north of San Francisco.

The Redding fire has grown to 206 square miles (533-square-kilometer) and has destroyed 1,060 homes and many other structures.

Two firefighters and four other people have been killed since the blaze, which ignited July 23, raced with extraordinary fury toward the region's largest city. More than 1,300 homes remained threatened.

Wildfires typically create whirls but rarely of the strength of the one recorded July 26, Dykema said.

Whirls are created when hot air rises and twists tightly, he said. The hotter the fire, the faster the air rises and the tighter it twists until it takes off as a tornado.



A 747 Global Airtanker makes a drop in front of advancing flames from a wildfire Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018, in Lakeport, Calif. (Kent Porter /The Press Democrat via AP)

To the southwest of Redding, new evacuations were ordered late Thursday at the Mendocino Complex, where twin fires have ravaged a combined 250 square miles (621 square kilometers), destroyed 41 residences and threatened 9,200 homes.

The combined fires have prompted about 15,000 people to evacuate their homes.

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection spokeswoman Jane LaBoa said wildfire remains several miles from the evacuated communities along the eastern shore of Clear Lake, about 100 miles (160 kilometers) northwest of Sacramento. But she said trajectory and the weather forecast prompted officials to evacuate the communities Friday out of an abundance of caution.

"It looks like there's dicey weather on the way," LaBoa said.

The wildfire has grown to 175 square miles (280 square kilometers) and is a few miles from connecting with a second blaze that has grown to 64 square miles (105 square kilometers).



Flames from a wildfire advance up a ridge, towering over a home that eventually burned, Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018, near Lakeport, Calif. (Kent Porter /The Press Democrat via AP)

The twin fires have destroyed 41 homes.

In Sierra Nevada, firefighters achieved 41 percent containment of a 115-square-mile (298-square-kilometer) forest fire that has shut down Yosemite Valley and other adjacent portions of Yosemite National Park at what is normally the height of summer tourism.

The fire has reached into remote areas of the country's third-oldest national park. Workers who live in Yosemite's popular Valley region were ordered to leave Friday because of inaccessible roads.

The fire also killed two firefighters.

A new report says the first firefighter, a California bulldozer operator, nearly slipped off a steep mountain trail three times before his vehicle finally rolled into a ravine and fatally crushed him.



Flames from a wildfire devour a home off Scotts Valley Road, Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018, near Lakeport, Calif. (Kent Porter /The Press Democrat via AP)

Each earlier slip alone qualified as a "near miss" warning that the century-old mining trail could collapse, according to the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's preliminary report.

Braden Varney, 36, was working alone overnight July 14 fighting the wildfire while his assistant went to get a new hydraulic hose. Varney's radio wasn't communicating with headquarters, so his assistant relayed messages—until they lost contact.

The report says the death of the 10-year veteran highlights the need for better risk assessment, communication and supervision.

Officials have not said how the other three firefighters died fighting blazes near Yosemite and Redding.



Flames from a wildfire advance down a hillside, towering over homes off Scotts Valley Road, Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018, near Lakeport, Calif. (Kent Porter /The Press Democrat via AP)



A tower of smoke pours from Cow Mountain as Burney, California firefighter Bob May keeps a watch on surrounding vegetation for spot fires during a wildfire off Scotts Valley Road, Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018, near Lakeport, Calif. (Kent Porter /The Press Democrat via AP)



A firefighter walks around a swimming pool sprayed by phos-chek fire retardant after an air tanker made a pass while fighting a wildfire near Lakeport, Calif., Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018. (Kent Porter /The Press Democrat via AP)



Firefighters stand watch on a roof as a wildfire sweeps through the area near Lakeport, Calif., Thursday, August 2, 2018. (Kent Porter /The Press Democrat via AP)



A resident, in yellow, wishing not to be identified, is comforted after seeing her fire-ravaged home for the first time Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018, in Redding, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



From left, Shasta County Health and Human Services workers Mike Rinehart, Jon Taylor, Melanie Gilchrist and Theresa Ellis stand and watch as the procession for Redding fire inspector Jeremy Stoke passes in Redding, Calif., Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018. Stoke, who died last week in the Carr Fire, was being taken from the coroner's office to a funeral home. Fire officials say a massive blaze in Northern California that has killed six people and torched more than 1,000 homes grew overnight, fueled by wind. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said Thursday firefighters made some gains and the blaze is now a third contained. (AP Photo/Michael Burke)



Shasta County Health and Human Services workers stand and watch as the procession for Redding fire inspector Jeremy Stoke passes in Redding, Calif., Thursday, Aug. 2, 2018. Stoke, who died last week in the Carr Fire, was being taken from the coroner's office to a funeral home. Fire officials say a massive blaze in Northern California that has killed six people and torched more than 1,000 homes grew overnight, fueled by wind. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said Thursday firefighters made some gains and the blaze is now a third contained. (AP Photo/Michael Burke)



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