

Glacier wildfire forces evacuations, Yosemite to reopen

August 13 2018, by Matthew Brown



In this photo taken Sunday, Aug. 12, 2018, a fire burns next to Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park in northwest Montana. The fire, which was started by lightning on Saturday night, has forced the evacuation of the Lake McDonald Lodge and a nearby campground. (Chris Peterson/Hungry Horse News via AP)

A wildfire destroyed structures and forced evacuations Monday from the busiest area of Montana's Glacier National Park, as officials in California prepared to reopen Yosemite National Park following a two-

week closure.

The National Park Service said Glacier's 25-site Sprague Creek campground was being evacuated a day after a fast-moving fire forced the evacuation of 82 rooms at the historic Lake McDonald Lodge.

A second campground, with 87 sites, and some private residences inside the park's boundary also were evacuated. A 30-mile (48-kilometer) stretch of the scenic Going-to-the-Sun-Road was closed to traffic.

Glacier officials said in a statement that structures on the north end of Lake McDonald were lost but did not provide details on the number and type. Officials had no estimate on the fire's size.

Wildfires flare up regularly at many of the large national parks that dot the U.S. West, often burning in densely-forested, backcountry areas where their effects are limited. This year's blazes threaten to have a magnified impact, coming at the height of the summer tourist season.

Yosemite was scheduled to reopen Tuesday after being largely closed since July 25 due to smoke from fires in remote areas that choked the scenic Yosemite Valley.

The closure caused upheaval for thousands of tourists whose summer trips were cancelled. Visitors were warned to expect limited hours and services as the park returns to normal.



In this photo taken Sunday, Aug. 12, 2018, an air tanker drops water over a wildfire burning in Glacier National Park, Mont. The fire was started by lightning on Saturday night and forced the evacuation of the Lake McDonald Lodge and closed part of the scenic Going-to-the-Sun Road in the park. (Chris Peterson/Hungry Horse News via AP)

The fire burning in Glacier was one of several started by lightning on Saturday evening. Windy, dry conditions on Sunday caused the blaze to spread rapidly, in full view of tourists and people who live and work around Lake McDonald, a 9-mile (14-kilometer) long body of water ringed by steep-sided mountains.

"It just completely exploded. Yesterday we were watching it grow all day and now it's so smoky you can't see anything," said Kyersten Siebenaler with Glacier Outfitters, which rents boats in Apgar, a small community at the south end of the lake.

Siebenaler said she'd been trying to help tourists who evacuated find places to stay on the east side of the park, where it was not as smoky.

Two planes from Canada were brought in to help battle the blaze, but officials said high winds prevented their pilots from flying close enough to the fire to be effective.

The lake was partially closed to boaters while the planes were scooping up water to drop on the fire, Siebenaler said.

It's the second year in a row that wildfires prompted evacuations around Lake McDonald. A blaze in the area last year destroyed the Sperry Chalet, an iconic backcountry lodge built in 1914.

Taylor Creasey of Whitefish said she and a friend drove up to the lodge Sunday afternoon after they heard about the fire, the Missoulian newspaper reported. She posted a video on Facebook of huge plumes of smoke hanging over burning ridges around the lake.

"We didn't expect to see anything that crazy," Creasey said Monday. "It was so cold there, but at the same time really hot—you could feel the heat radiating across the lake. It was windy and cold and hot all at the same time."

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