

# Wind moves huge wildfire away from nuke facilities in Idaho

July 24 2019, by Rebecca Boone And Felicia Fonseca

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In this Monday, July 22, 2019, photo, an air tanker drops retardant on a ridge overlooking the North Peak neighborhood as the Museum Fire burns north of Flagstaff, Ariz. At least 1000 acres have burned and the fire continues to grow as crews were trying to keep the wildfire in a popular Arizona vacation area from homes and a ski resort. (Tom Tingle/The Arizona Republic via AP)

The largest wildfire at the nation's primary nuclear research facility in recent history had been burning close to buildings containing nuclear

fuel and other radioactive material but a change in wind direction Wednesday was pushing the flames into open range at the sprawling site in Idaho, officials said.

The lightning-caused fire at the Idaho National Laboratory is one of several across the U.S. West.

Before the wind shifted, the Idaho blaze got close to several lab facilities, including one where high-level radioactive materials are studied and another holding a nuclear reactor, spokeswoman Kerry Martin said.

The lab has several safety measures for wildfires that often ignite in southeastern Idaho's desert rangeland, including clearing ground around each building and having several specially trained fire crews stationed around the site that's nearly the size of Rhode Island.

"It's not our first rodeo," Martin said. "We have fire stations, a lot of fire equipment, we have trained firefighters and equipment to cut barriers."

The wildfire that ignited Monday is estimated to have burned about 172 square miles (445 square kilometers). Non-essential laboratory employees have been evacuated.

The nuclear research site includes reactors and research materials, as well as facilities for processing high-level nuclear waste and other radioactive waste.

Meanwhile, rain in a forested Arizona city helped firefighters battle a wildfire that has raged for days in a scenic mountain pass but is raising the risk of flooding, officials said.

Up to 1 inch (2.5 centimeters) of rain allowed crews to directly attack

the fire, extinguish flames and build containment lines in an area where nearly 3 square miles (8 square kilometers) have burned since Sunday, according to fire management team spokesman Steve Kleist.

Forecasters warned of possible flooding because of thunderstorms expected Wednesday and Thursday to drench fire-scarred areas in the Coconino National Forest surrounding Flagstaff, a popular mountain getaway in the largest ponderosa pine forest in the U.S.

Residents ordered to evacuate more than two dozen homes this week were being allowed to go back.

Ladd Vagen, his wife and two daughters were staying at a hotel. He said he's curious to scope out the landscape when they go home Wednesday but believes the community "is in just fine shape."

Still, the family will be on notice they may have to flee again.

"I don't think we're going to unload our cars," Vagen said. "We may unload minimally and do a better job of organizing what we're going to take if we go back to 'go' status."

Arizona has declared an emergency, freeing up funding to battle the blaze. The firefighting cost to date is \$2.1 million, incident commander Rich Nieto said.

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