

California wildfires some of largest in state history

August 22 2020, by Olga R. Rodriguez and Janie Har



Pam, who declined to give a last name, examines the remains of her partner's Vacaville, Calif., home on Friday, Aug. 21, 2020. The residence burned as the LNU Lightning Complex fires ripped through the area Tuesday night. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Lightning-sparked wildfires in Northern California exploded in size

Friday to become some of the largest in state history, forcing thousands to flee and destroying hundreds of homes and other structures as reinforcements began arriving to help weary firefighters.

More than 12,000 firefighters aided by helicopters and air tankers are battling wildfires throughout California. Three groups of fires, called complexes, burning north, east and south of San Francisco have together scorched 991 square miles (2,566 square kilometers), destroyed more than 500 structures and killed five people.

At least 100,000 people are under evacuation orders.

The number of personnel assigned to the sprawling LNU Complex—a cluster of blazes burning in the heart of wine country north of San Francisco—doubled to more than 1,000 firefighters Friday, Cal Fire Division Chief Ben Nicholls said.

"I'm happy to say there are resources all around the [fire](#) today. We have engines on all four sides of it working hand-in-hand with the bulldozers to start containing this fire, putting it to bed," Nicholls aid.

Fire crews with help from "copious amounts of fixed-wing aircraft" were working Friday to stop a large blaze from reaching communities in the West Dry Creek Valley of Sonoma County, he said.

The blazes, coming during a heat wave that has seen temperatures top 100 degrees, are taxing the state's firefighting capacity but assistance from throughout the country was beginning to arrive, with 10 states sending fire crews, engines and aircraft to help, Gov. Gavin Newsom said.



Veterinary technician Brianna Jeter comforts a llama injured during the LNU Lightning Complex fires on Friday, Aug. 21, 2020, in Vacaville, Calif. At right, animal control officer Dae Kim prepares to euthanize the llama. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

"We have more people but it's not enough. We have more air support but it's still not enough and that's why we need support from our federal partners," Newsom said.

Newsom thanked President Donald Trump's administration for its help a day after pushing back on Trump's criticism of the state's wildfire prevention work, saying that he has a "strong personal relationship with the president."

"While he may make statements publicly, the working relationship privately has been a very effective one," Newsom said.

There are 560 fires burning in the state, many small and remote but there are about two dozen major fires, mainly in Northern California. Many blazes were sparked by thousands of lightning strikes earlier in the week.

Tens of thousands of homes were threatened by flames that drove through dense and bone-dry trees and brush. Some fires doubled in size within 24 hours, fire officials said.



A member of a California Dept. of Corrections fire crew runs along a containment line with a chainsaw while fighting the CZU August Lightning Complex Fire, Friday, Aug. 21, 2020, in Bonny Doon, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

With firefighting resources tight, homes in remote, hard-to-get-to places burned unattended. CalFire Chief Mark Brunton pleaded with residents to quit battling fires on their own, saying that just causes more problems for the professionals.

"We had last night three separate rescues that pulled our vital, very few resources away," he said.

An anxious Rachel Stratman, 35, and her husband, Quentin Lareau, 40, waited for word Friday about their home in the Forest Springs community of Boulder Creek, in Santa Cruz County, after evacuating earlier this week. She knew one house burned but received conflicting information about the rest of the neighborhood.

"It's so hard to wait and not know," she said. "I'm still torn if I want people to be going back to the area and videotaping. I know they cause the firefighters distraction, but that's the only way we know."



Solano County Community Animal Response Team volunteers Marshall Zavata, right, and Steve Hardin comfort a llama injured during the LNU Lightning Complex fires on Friday, Aug. 21, 2020. The llama was euthanized shortly after. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

The couple were in a San Jose hotel with medication she needs after undergoing a transplant surgery last month. She collected her mother's ashes and some clothes while her husband closed windows and readied the home before they evacuated Tuesday.

"I kept looking at things and kept thinking I should grab this or that, but I just told myself I needed to leave. I didn't bring any official documents and I didn't bring my house deed or car title. No passport," she said.

The ferocity of the fires was astonishing so early in the fire season, which historically has seen the largest and deadliest blazes when dry gusts blow in the fall.

But the [death toll](#) already had reached at least six since the majority of blazes started less than a week ago. Five deaths involved fires burning in wine country north of San Francisco. The other death was a helicopter pilot who crashed while dropping water on a blaze in Fresno County.



Members of the Glendale, Calif., Fire Department hose down hot spots along Empire Grade Rd. after the CZU August Lightning Complex Fire went through, Friday, Aug. 21, 2020, in Bonny Doon, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Henry Wofford, spokesman for the Napa County Sheriff's Office, said three of the bodies were found Thursday in a burned home. The area was under an evacuation order due to "very, very heavy" fire that he said burned multiple homes. He said authorities are trying to determine the identities.

In neighboring Solano County, Sheriff Thomas A. Ferrara reported the death of a male resident. The other victim was a Pacific Gas & Electric utility worker who was found dead Wednesday in a vehicle in the Vacaville area.

At least 14,000 people in Solano County remained under mandatory evacuation Friday, Solano County Undersheriff Brad DeWall said. He said 119 homes have been destroyed in his county.

At least two other people were missing and more than 30 civilians and firefighters have been injured, authorities said.



A property is ravaged by the CZU August Lightning Complex Fire, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020, in Bonny Doon, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Smoke and ash billowing from the fires has fouled the air throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and along California's scenic central coast.

The SCU Lightning Complex fire burning east of San Francisco started Tuesday and the slightly smaller LNU Lightning Complex burning in wine country that was sparked a day earlier already have become among the 10 largest wildfires in state history. Firefighters had only contained a small portion of the wildfires by Friday afternoon.

In Napa County, Crosswalk Community Church has transformed its sanctuary and gymnasium into an evacuation shelter, filling the floor

with cots spaced at least 6 feet (1.8 meters) apart. Pastor Peter Shaw said the church has seen a steady stream of people stopping for resources. Some were just looking for information, while others needed gift cards for food and [basic needs](#).



A home burns as the CZU August Lightning Complex Fire passes by, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020, in Ben Lomond, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



A forest burns as the CZU August Lightning Complex Fire advances, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020, in Bonny Doon, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Civilian volunteers Brian Alvarez, left, and Nate Bramwell fight the CZU August Lightning Complex Fire on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020, in Bonny Doon, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Brian Alvarez joins a group of civilian volunteers fighting the CZU August Lightning Complex Fire on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020, in Bonny Doon, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Debris from a fire is seen on the eye of a horse found on a farm on Pleasants Valley in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Neighbors checked on the horse and wanted to make sure it was okay. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)



A home is burned to the ground by the CZU August Lightning Complex Fire, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020, in Ben Lomond, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Smoke from California wildfires partially obscure the sky over Oracle Park during the second inning of a baseball game between the San Francisco Giants and the Los Angeles Angels in San Francisco, Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)



As the LNU Lightning Complex fires burn nearby, a PG&E worker clears a power line blocking a roadway in unincorporated Napa County, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Fire crews across the region scrambled to contain dozens of wildfires sparked by lightning strikes. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



A U.S. flag on Cantelow Road waves in the wind after surviving a fire in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)



A plume billows over Healdsburg, Calif., as the LNU Lightning Complex fires burn on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Fire crews across the region scrambled to contain dozens of wildfires sparked by lightning strikes. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



A plastic fence lies on the charred grass after being destroyed by a fire on Pleasants Valley Road in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)



Sarah Hawkins, of Vacaville, finds a vase in the rubble after her home was destroyed by a fire in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)



A pair of dead goats lie on the ground that perished in a fire after being trapped in a fence on a farm on English Hills Road in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)



A home on Millie May Lane is destroyed by a fire in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)



A man glances up at a tree that is blocking his way while attempting to go home after a fire ravaged the area on Mix Canyon Road in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. The man did not want to be identified but stated he lived just a few hundred feet past the tree. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)



A charred statue of St. Francis is all that remains standing at a home on Millie May Lane that was destroyed by a fire in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)



Chris Reiter, of Vacaville, left, walks with her husband, Chris Garcia, as he leads a horse to safety on Pleasants Valley in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. Garcia lives down the road and their son knew the owners of the horse and wanted to make sure it was okay. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)



A man tries to break off a branch on a tree that is blocking his way while attempting to go home after a fire ravaged the area on Mix Canyon Road in Vacaville, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2020. The man did not want to be identified but stated he lived just a few hundred feet past the tree. The LNU Lightning Complex fires began in Napa and Sonoma counties and have traveled into Solano, Lake and Yolo counties while burning more than 200 square miles. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Bay Area News Group via AP)

"COVID-19 complicates everything," Shaw wrote in an email to The Associated Press. "Socially distanced cots drastically decreases our capacity."

A few people have stayed the night, Shaw said, adding several people parked their RVs in the church parking lot.

"The longer the evacuations stay in place, I suspect the more people we will see," he said.

Eric Swensen packed early and got ready to evacuate after seeing ash, burned leaves and charred bark fall around his family's home in Boulder Creek earlier this week. He, his 11-year-old son, girlfriend Gundy Sartor, and neighbor Lesley Wludyga packed a pet lizard and important documents and headed north to Redwood City.

But as of Friday, he still hadn't heard if his home had survived. He read on social media that firefighters had to retreat from the area.

"Obviously, the current resources dedicated to the fire are nowhere near enough, but we also understand that California is burning, and they are doing what they can," Swensen said.

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