

California fires bring more chopper rescues, power shutoffs

September 8 2020, by Marcio Jose Sanchez and Christopher Weber



Pacific Gas and Electric workers stand along Highway 168 as the Creek Fire advances Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2020, near Alder Springs, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Helicopters rescued more people from wildfires Tuesday as flames

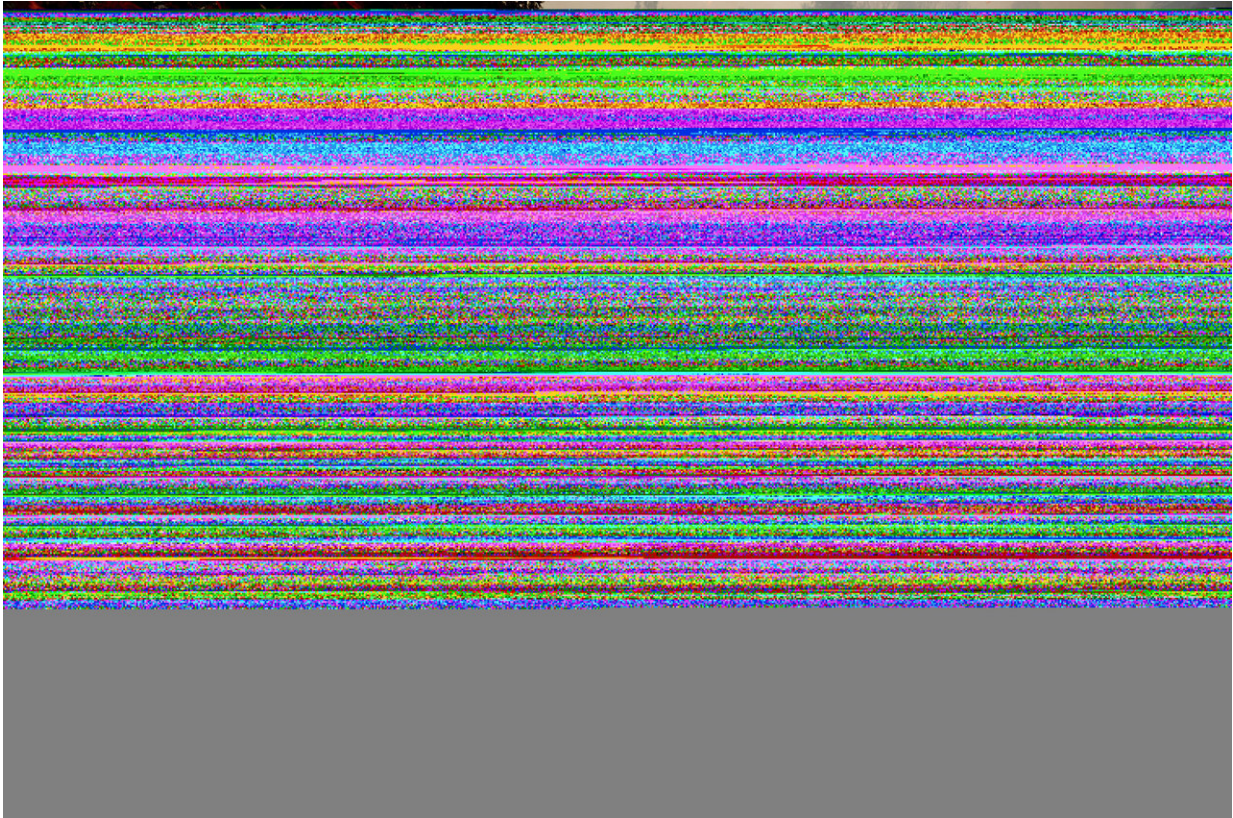
chewed through bone-dry California after a scorching Labor Day weekend that saw a dramatic airlift of more than 200 people and ended with the state's largest utility cutting power to 172,000 customers to try to prevent more blazes.

Rescue helicopters pulled dozens of people from the Sierra National Forest through the morning, the California National Guard said.

California has already set a record with 2 million acres (809,000 hectares) burned this year, and the worst part of the wildfire season is just beginning. The previous record was set just two years ago and included the deadliest wildfire in state history, which swept through the community of Paradise and killed 85 people.

That 2018 blaze was started by power lines amid strong winds and tinder-dry conditions. Liability from billions of dollars in claims from that and other fires forced the Pacific Gas & Electric utility to seek bankruptcy protection. To guard against new disasters, the company last year began preemptive power shutoffs when fire conditions are exceptionally dangerous.

That's the situation now in Northern California, where high and dry winds are expected until Wednesday. PG&E said it has learned from past problems and will seek this year to make the outages "smaller in size, shorter in length and smarter for customers."



The Creek Fire burns along a hillside in the Cascadel Woods community of Madera County, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 7, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

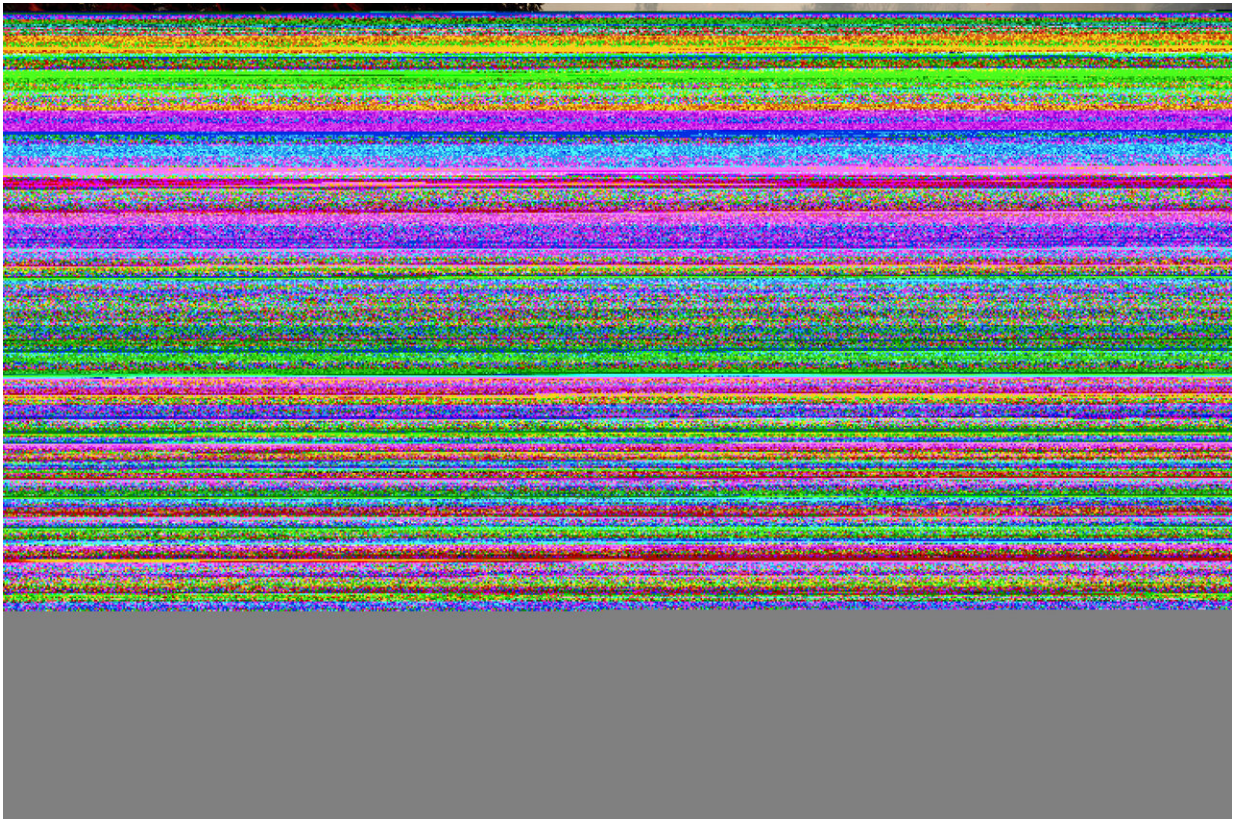
More than 14,000 firefighters are battling more than two dozen fires around the state. Two of the three largest blazes in state history are burning in the San Francisco Bay Area.

California was not alone: Hurricane-force winds and high temperatures kicked up wildfires across parts of the Pacific Northwest over the holiday weekend, burning hundreds of thousands of acres and mostly destroying the small town of Malden in eastern Washington.

In Southern California, fires burned in Los Angeles, San Bernardino and San Diego counties, and the forecast called for the arrival of the region's

notorious Santa Ana winds. The U.S. Forest Service on Monday decided to close all eight national forests in the region and to shutter campgrounds statewide.

"Existing fires are displaying extreme fire behavior. New fire starts are likely. Weather conditions are worsening, and we simply do not have enough resources to fully fight and contain every fire," said Randy Moore, a forester for the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest region that covers California.



A firetruck drives along state Highway 168 while battling the Creek Fire in the Shaver Lake community of Fresno County, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 7, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Lynne Tolmachoff, spokeswoman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, known as Cal Fire, said it's "unnerving" to have reached a record for acreage burned so soon. September and October usually are the worst months for fires because vegetation has dried out and high winds are more common.

While the two mammoth San Francisco Bay Area fires were largely contained after burning for three weeks, firefighters struggled to corral several other major blazes ahead of the expected winds. Evacuation orders were expanded to more mountain communities Monday as the so-called Creek Fire burned through the Sierra National Forest in Central California.

It was one of many recent major fires that displayed terrifyingly swift movement. The fire advanced 15 miles (24 kilometers) in a single day during the weekend. Since starting Friday from an unknown cause, it has burned 212 square miles (549 square kilometers). Forty-five homes and 20 other structures were confirmed destroyed so far.



A firefighter battles the Creek Fire in the Shaver Lake community of Fresno County, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 7, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



Firefighter Nick Grinstead battles the Creek Fire in the Shaver Lake community of Fresno County, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 7, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



Firefighters Nick Grinstead and Trevor While battle the Creek Fire in the Shaver Lake community of Fresno County, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 7, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



Ryan Warren takes a picture from the top of Skinner Butte in Eugene, Ore., Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2020 as smoke clogs the sky from wildfires burning in the state. (Chris Pietsch/The Register-Guard via AP)



A firefighter battles the Creek Fire in the Shaver Lake community of Fresno County, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 7, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



Jim Butler evacuates from the North Fork community in Madera County, Calif., as the Creek Fire approaches on Monday, Sept. 7, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



A Los Angeles fire department helicopter makes a water drop over a brush fire at the Sepulveda Basin in the Sherman Oaks area of Los Angeles on Sunday, Sept. 6, 2020. In Southern California, crews scrambled to douse several fires that popped up. The largest was ablaze in the foothills of Yucaipa east of Los Angeles that prompted evacuation orders for eastern portions of the city of 54,000 along with several mountain communities. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



Fire engineer, Paul Kahler, of Fountain Valley, Calif., examines a melted light post where a structure was destroyed by the El Dorado wildfire near Yucaipa, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 7, 2020. A couple's plan to reveal their baby's gender went up not in blue or pink smoke but in flames when the device they used sparked a wildfire east of Los Angeles. The fire started Saturday morning in dry grasses at El Dorado Ranch Park, a rugged natural area in the city of Yucaipa. (Cindy Yamanaka/The Orange County Register/SCNG via AP)



Jeremy Hedrick holds his son Jeep as smoke from the Creek Fire fills the air in a marina, where campers were being held due to impassable roads, caused by the fire Monday, Sept. 7, 2020, in Shaver Lake, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Los Angeles Fire Department firefighters work to douse brush fires in the Sepulveda Basin in the Sherman Oaks area of Los Angeles, Sunday, Sept. 6, 2020. In Southern California, crews scrambled to douse several fires that popped up. The largest was a blaze in the foothills of Yucaipa east of Los Angeles that prompted evacuation orders for eastern portions of the city of 54,000 along with several mountain communities. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel)



Inelva Gonzalez, of Armona, Calif. kisses her dog SayD in a marina, where campers were being held due to impassable roads, as the Creek Fire continues to burn Monday, Sept. 7, 2020, in Shaver Lake, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Two men take out their belongings on wheel barrows during a mandatory evacuation due to the Creek Fire Monday, Sept. 7, 2020, in Auberry, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Debra Rios wasn't home Monday when the order came to evacuate her hometown of Auberry, just northeast of Fresno. Sheriff's deputies went to her ranch property to pick up her 92-year-old mother, Shirley MacLean. They reunited at an evacuation center.

"I hope like heck the fire doesn't reach my little ranch," Rios said. "It's not looking good right now. It's an awfully big fire."

Mountain roads saw a steady stream of cars and trucks leaving the community of about 2,300 on Monday afternoon.

Firefighters working in steep terrain saved the tiny town of Shaver Lake from flames that roared down hillsides toward a marina. About 30 houses were destroyed in the remote hamlet of Big Creek, resident Toby Wait said.

"About half the private homes in town burned down," he said. "Words cannot even begin to describe the devastation of this community."

A school, church, library, historic general store and a major hydroelectric plant were spared in the community of about 200 residents, baby's gender.

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