

California milestone: 4 million acres burned in wildfires

October 2 2020, by Olga R. Rodriguez



A firefighter battles the Glass Fire burning in a Calistoga, Calif., vineyard Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

California is poised to hit a fearsome milestone: 4 million acres (1.6 million hectares) burned this year by wildfires that have killed 31 people

and incinerated hundreds of homes in what is already the worst fire season on record.

Flames have scorched an area larger than Connecticut and fire crews at a blaze in the wine country north of San Francisco were on high alert Friday as forecasters warned of rextreme fire danger into Saturday.

However, powerful winds didn't materialize early Friday, allowing fire crews a chance to make some gains, but winds up to 30 mph (48 kph) were forecast to push through the hills of Napa and Sonoma counties as the Glass Fire, which exploded in size earlier in the week, threatens more than 28,000 homes and other buildings.

"So far we have not seen the velocity of the winds that we were expecting," said Cal Fire Battalion Chief Mark Brunton. "But there will be gusts and ... we do have hot embers and it won't take much to take that and blow it into a very dry receptive fuel bed. That gives us cause for concern."

Winds were blowing at higher elevations on the western side of the fire and crews expected a long battle to keep flames from jumping containment lines and to prevent spot fires from leaping ahead to spark new blazes.



A firefighter passes flames while battling the Glass Fire in a Calistoga, Calif., vineyard Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

"It's going to be a big firefight for us over the next 36 hours," said Billy See, an assistant chief with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire.

More crews and equipment were deployed in and around Calistoga, a town of 5,000 people known for hot springs, mud baths and wineries in the hills of Napa County about 70 miles (110 kilometers) north of San Francisco.

The area was also experiencing high temperatures and thick smoke that fouled the air throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

Gov. Gavin Newsom toured fire-ravaged Napa County on Thursday and said the state was putting "all we have in terms of resources" into firefighting, particularly over the windy period.

"I've got four young kids in elementary school and I can't imagine for the children and parents, the families, that may be seeing these images, what's going through your minds," said Newsom, standing in front of a burned-out elementary school building.



A firefighter runs past flames while battling the Glass Fire in a Calistoga, Calif., vineyard Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

"We're not just here for a moment. We're here to rebuild and to

reimagine your school," he said, adding: "We have your backs."

The Glass Fire is the fourth major blaze in the region in three years and comes ahead of the third anniversary of an Oct. 8, 2017, wildfire that killed 22 people.

Newsom said people there have been "torn asunder by wildfires seemingly every single year, this drumbeat, where people are exhausted, concerned, anxious about their fate and their future."

Around the state, 17,000 firefighters were battling nearly two dozen major blazes. Virtually all the damage has been done since mid-August, when five of the six largest fires in state history erupted. Lightning strikes caused some of the most devastating blazes.

Numerous studies have linked bigger wildfires in America to climate change from the burning of coal, oil and gas. Scientists say climate change has made California much drier, meaning trees and other plants are more flammable.



Flames from the Glass Fire burn a truck in a Calistoga, Calif., vineyard Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Cal Fire Deputy Chief Jonathan Cox said wildfires have scorched 3.9 million acres in California since Aug. 15. That figure, which works out to more than 6,000 square miles (15,500 square kilometers), is astonishing even in a state that has had its fair share of fires.

"It's likely that over the next day or two we will crest the 4-million-acre mark. The biggest year before this year was 1.54 million," Cal Fire Chief Thom Porter said. "We are dwarfing that previous record and we have a lot of season left to go."

The death toll increased to 31 people after a person burned in the LNU

Lightning Complex died from their injuries, Cal Fire said in a statement. A cluster of fires sparked by lightning in mid-August in the San Francisco Bay Area was fully contained Thursday.

Fire officials said the Glass Fire was their first priority. Since erupting Sunday, the fire has destroyed nearly 600 buildings, including 220 homes and nearly the same number of commercial structures.



A chimney stands at a Fairwinds Estate Winery building, which burned in the Glass Fire, on Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020, in Calistoga, Calif. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

About 80,000 people were under evacuation orders, which were

expanded on Thursday.

Fire and public safety officials warned that more evacuations are possible. They asked people to remain vigilant, stay out of evacuation zones and quit demanding that officers let them back into off-limits neighborhoods.

About 150 miles (240 kilometers) to the north of wine country, the Zogg Fire, which also erupted during Sunday's high winds and grew quickly, has killed four people.

The Shasta County sheriff's office released two of their names Thursday: Karin King, 79, who was found on the road where the fire started, and Kenneth Vossen, 52, who suffered serious burns and later died in a hospital. Both were from the small town of Igo.

The fire had destroyed 153 buildings, about half of them homes. It was 39% contained.



Representative Mike Thompson, left, listens to director of Cal Fire Thom Porter talk about the Glass Fire with Governor Gavin Newsom, Senator Bill Dodd and Assemblywoman Cecilia Aguiar-Curry near St. Helena, Calif., Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat via AP, Pool)



A firefighter carries hose while battling the Glass Fire in a Calistoga, Calif.,

vineyard Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



Representative Mike Thompson, director of Cal Fire Thom Porter, Governor Gavin Newsom, Senator Bill Dodd and Assemblywoman Cecilia Aguiar-Curry discuss the Glass Fire at Foothills Elementary School near St. Helena, Calif., Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat via AP, Pool)



Scorched equipment stands in a Fairwinds Estate Winery building, which burned in the Glass Fire, on Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020, in Calistoga, Calif. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



California Governor Gavin Newsom speaks at a press conference while touring areas damaged by the Glass Fire at Foothills Elementary School near St. Helena, Calif., Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat via AP, Pool)



A helicopter prepares to drop water on the Glass Fire burning along Highway 29 in Calistoga, Calif., on Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



Following the Glass Fire, umbrellas stand in a scorched picnic area at Fairwinds Estate Winery on Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020, in Calistoga, Calif. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



California Governor Gavin Newsom waves as he leaves the burned portion of Foothills Elementary School following a press conference near St. Helena, Calif., Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat via AP, Pool)



California Governor Gavin Newsom speaks at a press conference while touring areas damaged by the Glass Fire at Foothills Elementary School near St. Helena, Calif., Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat via AP, Pool)



California Governor Gavin Newsom arrives at Foothills Elementary School while touring areas damaged by the Glass Fire near St. Helena, Calif., Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat via AP, Pool)



A firefighter walks a path as the Glass Fire burns along Highway 29 in Calistoga, Calif., on Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)



Following the Glass Fire, umbrellas stand in a scorched picnic area at Fairwinds Estate Winery on Thursday, Oct. 1, 2020, in Calistoga, Calif. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

The weekend was expected to usher in some cooling—or less intense heat—and long-range forecast models hinted at the possibility of rain.

Hurricane Marie, spinning in the Pacific southwest of Baja California, was expected to weaken by the middle of next week but leftover tropical moisture may be pulled northward and bring "impressive rainfall" to Northern California, forecasters said.

"Obviously a forecast at over 180+ hours out will change a lot, but confidence is increasing for at least some wet weather late next week,"

the National Weather Service's San Francisco Bay Area office said.

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