

Winds intensifying as firefighters battle fire in California

October 1 2020, by Olga R. Rodriguez

Winds grew stronger Thursday in California's wine country, threatening to escalate a massive wildfire that has burned for days and destroyed hundreds of buildings.

More fire 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.

Winds gusting to 30 mph were forecast to push through the hills Thursday night and Friday, according to the National Weather Service. The area was also experiencing high temperatures and thick smoky air.

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

"It's been a long fire season and we're still at the heart of fire season here in California," said Billy See, an incident commander with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, also known as Cal Fire.

By the end of the week, "hopefully Mother Nature will play nice for a bit so my folks can get a little more aggressive on the ground," he said.

More than 2,000 firefighters were battling the Glass Fire, which has

charred 92 square miles (238.28 square kilometers) in Napa and Sonoma counties with almost no containment. It has destroyed nearly 600 buildings, including 220 homes and nearly the same number of commercial structures.

Gov. Gavin Newsom toured wildfire damage in Napa County on Thursday. With firefighters stretched thin by dozens of fires in recent weeks—and the potential for increasingly bad fire seasons in the future—Newsom promised to work for more funding to avoid and combat future blazes.

"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.

"We're in it for the long haul. 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."

It's the fourth major fire there in three years and comes ahead of the third anniversary of an Oct. 8, 2017, wildfire that killed 22 people.

Three fires, driven by gusty winds and high temperatures, merged into one on Sunday, tearing into vineyards and mountain areas, including part of the city of Santa Rosa. About 70,000 people were under evacuation orders, including the entire population of Calistoga.

Cal Fire Deputy Chief Jonathan Cox said wildfires have scorched 3.9 million acres in California since Aug. 15, an astonishing record even in a state that has had its fair share of fires. The state is battling some two dozen major fires with crews scrambling to snuff out smaller fires before they balloon.

"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."

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.

California's power grid operator called for voluntary conservation of electricity from 3 p.m. to 10 p.m. Thursday, as high heat is expected to grip the state, taxing electricity supplies, primarily from the use of air conditioning.

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 deadly blaze that spread to neighboring Tehama County has burned 87 square miles (nearly 226 square kilometers) and destroyed 153 buildings, about half of them homes. It was 39% contained.

Fire-related deaths in California this year total 30.

Since the beginning of the year, thousands of wildfires have burned over 6,000 square miles (15,500 square kilometers) in California. More than 96,000 residents are under evacuation orders across the state, the

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said.

© 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Winds intensifying as firefighters battle fire in California (2020, October 1) retrieved 26 June 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2020-10-firefighters-brace-violent-northern-california.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.