

California fire prompts evacuations; Oregon blaze balloons

July 18 2021, by Daisy Nguyen and Gillian Flaccus



Firefighters battle the Tamarack Fire in the Markleeville community of Alpine County, Calif., on Saturday, July 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

A rapidly growing wildfire south of Lake Tahoe jumped a highway, prompting more evacuation orders and the cancellation of an extreme

bike ride through the Sierra Nevada on Saturday as critically dangerous wildfire weather loomed in the coming days.

The Tamarack Fire, which was sparked by lightning on July 4, exploded overnight and was over 32 square miles (82 square kilometers) as of Saturday evening, according to the [Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest](#). The blaze was threatening Markleeville, a small town close to the California-Nevada state line. It has destroyed at least three structures, authorities said, and was burning toward the Alpine County Airport after jumping a highway.

A notice posted on the 103-mile (165-kilometer) Death Ride's website said several communities in the area had been evacuated and ordered all riders to clear the area. The fire left thousands of bikers and spectators stranded in the small town and racing to get out.

Kelli Pennington and her family were camping near the town Friday so her husband could participate in his ninth ride when they were told to leave. They had been watching smoke develop over the course of the day, but were caught off guard by the fire's quick spread.

"It happened so fast," Pennington said. "We left our tents, hammock and some foods, but we got most of our things, shoved our two kids in the car and left."



The Tamarack Fire burns behind a greenhouse in the Markleeville community of Alpine County, Calif., on Saturday, July 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

Saturday's ride was supposed to mark the 40th Death Ride, which attracts thousands of cyclists to the region each year to ride through three mountain passes in the so-called California Alps. It was canceled last year during the coronavirus outbreak.

Paul Burgess, who drove from Los Angeles to participate in the ride, said most of the cyclists he met were thankful to steer clear of the fire danger.

"They just said this is just how it goes," Burgess said. "It's part of

climate change to a certain extent, it's part of just a lot of fuels that are not burnt, the humidity is low, the fuel moisture levels are low, and ... around the state, many parts of it are much like a tinderbox."

Afternoon winds blowing at 20 to 30 mph (32 to 48 kph) fanned the flames as they chewed through bone-dry timber and brush.

Meteorologists predicted critically dangerous fire weather through at least Monday in both California and southern Oregon, where the largest wildfire in the U.S. continued to race through bone-dry forests.



A scorched car rests on a roadside as the Tamarack Fire burns in the Markleeville community of Alpine County, Calif., on Saturday, July 17, 2021.
Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

The Bootleg Fire grew significantly overnight Saturday as dry and windy conditions took hold in the area, but containment of the inferno more than tripled as firefighters began to gain more control along its western flank. The fire was still burning rapidly and dangerously along its southern and eastern flanks, however, and authorities expanded evacuations in a largely rural area of lakes and wildlife refuges.

The fire was 453 square miles (1,173 square kilometers) in size, or more than 100 square miles larger than the area of New York City.

"This fire is large and moving so fast, every day it progresses 4 to 5 miles," said Incident Commander Joe Hassel. "One of the many challenges that our firefighters face every day is working in new country that can present new hazards all the time."

Extremely dry conditions and heat waves tied to climate change have swept the region, making wildfires harder to fight. Climate change has made the West much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.



A scorched car rests on a roadside as the Tamarack Fire burns in the Markleeville community of Alpine County, Calif., on Saturday, July 17, 2021.
Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

In southern Oregon, fire crews have dealt with dangerous and extreme fire conditions, including massive "fire clouds" that rise up to 6 miles (10 kilometers) above the blaze. The Bootleg Fire has destroyed at least 67 homes and 117 outbuildings.

The conflagration has forced 2,000 people to evacuate and is threatening 5,000 buildings, including homes and smaller structures in a rural area just north of the California border.

The Tamarack Fire sent heavy smoke over Lake Tahoe and into Nevada.

The National Weather Service warned of possible thunderstorms stretching [from the California coast to northern Montana](#) on Sunday and that "new lightning ignitions" are likely because of extremely dry fuels across the West.

Firefighters said in July they were facing conditions more typical of late summer or fall.



The Tamarack Fire burns behind a greenhouse in the Markleeville community of Alpine County, Calif., on Saturday, July 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

The fires were just two of numerous fires burning across the drought-

stricken U.S. West, as new fires popped up or grew rapidly in Oregon and California.

There were 70 active large fires and complexes of multiple fires that have burned nearly 1,659 square miles (4,297 square kilometers) in the U.S., the National Interagency Fire Center said. The U.S. Forest Service said at least 16 major fires were burning in the Pacific Northwest alone.

A fire in the mountains of northeast Oregon was also growing rapidly and was 17 square miles (44 square kilometers) in size on Saturday. The Elbow Creek fire started Thursday and has prompted evacuations in several small, rural communities around the Grande Ronde River about 30 miles (50 kilometers) southeast of Walla Walla, Washington.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown invoked the Emergency Conflagration Act to mobilize more firefighters and equipment to help fight that fire.



The Tamarack Fire burns in the Markleeville community of Alpine County, Calif., on Saturday, July 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Flames lick at a roadside as the Tamarack Fire burns in the Markleeville community of Alpine County, Calif., on Saturday, July 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



A firefighter walks towards a home while battling the Tamarack Fire in the Markleeville community of Alpine County, Calif., on Saturday, July 17, 2021.
Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



In this photo taken with a drone provided by the Bootleg Fire Incident Command, a pyrocumulus cloud, also known as a fire cloud, is seen over the Bootleg Fire in southern Oregon on Wednesday, July 14, 2021. Smoke and heat from a massive wildfire in southeastern Oregon are creating "fire clouds" over the blaze—dangerous columns of smoke and ash that can reach up to 30,000 feet (9,144 meters) and are visible for more than 100 miles (160 kilometers) away. Authorities have put these clouds at the top of the list of the extreme fire behavior they are seeing on the Bootleg Fire, the largest wildfire burning in the U.S. Credit: Bootleg Fire Incident Command via AP



Jessica Bell takes a video as the Dixie Fire burns along Highway 70 in Plumas National Forest, Calif., on Friday, July 16, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Benjamin Bell watches as the Dixie Fire burns along Highway 70 in Plumas National Forest, Calif., on Friday, July 16, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



In this photo provided by the Bootleg Fire Incident Command, the Bootleg Fire burns at night near Highway 34 in southern Oregon on Thursday, July 15, 2021. Firefighters scrambled Friday to control a raging inferno in southeastern Oregon that's spreading miles a day in windy conditions, one of numerous wildfires across the U.S. West that are straining resources. The Bootleg Fire, the largest wildfire burning in the U.S., has torched more than 377 square miles (976 square kilometers), and crews had little control of it. Credit: Jason Pettigrew/Bootleg Fire Incident Command via AP



Firefighters spray water from Union Pacific Railroad's fire train while battling the Dixie Fire in Plumas National Forest, Calif., on Friday, July 16, 2021.

Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



In this photo provided by the Bootleg Fire Incident Command, smoke from the Bootleg Fire rises behind the town of Bonanza, Ore., on Thursday, July 15, 2021. Firefighters scrambled Friday to control a raging inferno in southeastern Oregon that's spreading miles a day in windy conditions, one of numerous wildfires across the U.S. West that are straining resources. The Bootleg Fire, the largest wildfire burning in the U.S., has torched more than 377 square miles (976 square kilometers), and crews had little control of it. Credit: Bootleg Fire Incident Command via AP



Smoke rises from the Dixie Fire burning along Highway 70 in Plumas National Forest, Calif., on Friday, July 16, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



In this photo provided by the Bootleg Fire Incident Command, columns of smoke from the Bootleg Fire rise behind a water tender in southern Oregon on Friday, July 16, 2021. Firefighters scrambled Friday to control a raging inferno in southeastern Oregon that's spreading miles a day in windy conditions, one of numerous wildfires across the U.S. West that are straining resources. The

Bootleg Fire, the largest wildfire burning in the U.S., has torched more than 377 square miles (976 square kilometers), and crews had little control of it. Credit: Lisa Chambers/Bootleg Fire Incident Command via AP



Smoke billows behind power lines as the Dixie Fire burns along Highway 70 in Plumas National Forest, Calif., on Friday, July 16, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Jessica Bell watches as the Dixie Fire burns along Highway 70 in Plumas National Forest, Calif., on Friday, July 16, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Jessica and Benjamin Bell watch as the Dixie Fire burns along Highway 70 in Plumas National Forest, Calif., on Friday, July 16, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Firefighters spray water from Union Pacific Railroad's fire train while battling the Dixie Fire in Plumas National Forest, Calif., on Friday, July 16, 2021.

Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



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Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

The Dixie Fire, near the 2018 site of the deadliest fire in the U.S. in recent memory, was 5% contained and covered 39 square miles Saturday. The fire was in the Feather River Canyon, northeast of the town of Paradise, California, and survivors of that horrific [fire](#) that killed 85 people watched warily as the new blaze burned.

Officials ordered the evacuation of a wilderness recreation area and kept in place a warning for residents of the tiny communities of Pulga and east Concow to be ready to leave.

"We're prepared," said Mike Garappo, a retired military veteran. "We've dealt with fires living in the mountains forever. We know there's a chance it may not hit here, but we're ready to go in case."

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