

Californians hit hard hard with weekend of wildfire fears

August 8 2021, by Daisy Nguyen and Noah Berger



Burned trees and smoke fill the Bear River canyon after the River Fire burned through Friday, Aug. 6, 2021 in Chicago Park, Calif. Firefighters are gaining the upper hand on the fast-moving River Fire that broke out Wednesday near the town of Colfax and destroyed nearly 90 homes and other buildings. More than 5,000 people were ordered to evacuate in Placer and Nevada counties, state fire officials said. Credit: Elias Funez/The Union via AP

After four years of homelessness, Kesia Studebaker thought she finally landed on her feet when she found a job cooking in a diner and moved into a house in the small community of Greenville.

She had been renting for three months and was hoping stability would help her win back custody of her 14-year-old daughter. But in just one night, a raging wildfire tore through the mountain town and "took it all away," she said.

Fueled by strong winds and bone-dry vegetation, the Dixie Fire grew to become the largest single wildfire in state history. People living in the scenic forestlands of Northern California are facing a weekend of fear as it threatens to reduce thousands of homes to ashes.

"We knew we didn't get enough rainfall and fires could happen, but we didn't expect a monster like this," Studebaker said Saturday.

The fire incinerated much of Greenville on Wednesday and Thursday, destroying 370 homes and structures and threatening nearly 14,000 buildings in the northern Sierra Nevada. It had engulfed an area larger than the size of New York City.

The Dixie Fire, named for the road where it started, spanned an area of 700 square miles (1,813 square kilometers) Saturday night and was just 21% contained, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.



A structure sits damaged from the River Fire Friday, Aug. 6, 2021 in Chicago Park, Calif. Firefighters are gaining the upper hand on the fast-moving River Fire that broke out Wednesday near the town of Colfax and destroyed nearly 90 homes and other buildings. More than 5,000 people were ordered to evacuate in Placer and Nevada counties, state fire officials said. Credit: Elias Funez/The Union via AP

Four firefighters were taken to the hospital Friday after being struck by a fallen branch. More 20 people were initially reported missing, but by Saturday afternoon authorities had contacted all but four of them.

The fire's cause was under investigation. The Pacific Gas & Electric

utility has said it may have been sparked when a tree fell on one of its power lines. A [federal judge](#) ordered PG&E on Friday to give details about the equipment and vegetation where the fire started by Aug. 16.

Cooler overnight temperatures and higher humidity slowed the spread of the fire and temperatures topped 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 degrees Celsius) instead of the triple-digit highs recorded earlier in the week.

But the blaze and its neighboring fires, within several hundred miles of each other, posed an ongoing threat.



A utility pole hangs from a line after the base burned due to the flames of the River Fire Friday, Aug. 6, 2021 in Chicago Park, Calif. Firefighters are gaining the upper hand on the fast-moving River Fire that broke out Wednesday near the town of Colfax and destroyed nearly 90 homes and other buildings. More than 5,000 people were ordered to evacuate in Placer and Nevada counties, state fire officials said. Credit: Elias Funez/The Union via AP

Studebaker sought shelter at an evacuation center before setting up her tent in a friend's front yard.

She is counting on returning to her job if the restaurant where she works stays open. Her boss also evacuated when the town of Chester, northwest of Greenville, lost power and the smoke was so thick that it made it hard to breathe.

Heat waves and historic drought tied to climate change have made wildfires harder to fight in the American West. Scientists have said [climate change](#) has made the region much warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

Near the Klamath National Forest, firefighters kept a close watch on small communities that were ordered evacuated in the path of the Antelope Fire, which earlier threw up flames 100 feet (30 meters) high as it blackened bone-dry grass, brush and timber. It was just 20% contained.



A barren wasteland is left near the Bear River after the River Fire consumed thousands of acres of vegetation, Friday, Aug. 6, 2021 in Chicago Park, Calif. Firefighters are gaining the upper hand on the fast-moving River Fire that broke out Wednesday near the town of Colfax and destroyed nearly 90 homes and other buildings. More than 5,000 people were ordered to evacuate in Placer and Nevada counties, state fire officials said. Credit: Elias Funez/The Union via AP

Further northwest, about 500 homes scattered in and around Shasta-Trinity National Forest remained threatened by the Monument Fire and others by the McFarland Fire, both started by lightning storms last week, fire officials said.

About a two-hour drive south from the Dixie Fire, crews had surrounded nearly half of the River Fire that broke out Wednesday near the town of Colfax and destroyed 68 homes and other buildings. Evacuation orders for thousands of people in Nevada and Placer counties were lifted

Friday. Three people, including a firefighter, were injured, authorities said.

Smoke from the fires blanketed Northern California and western Nevada, causing [air quality](#) to deteriorate to very unhealthy and, at times, hazardous levels.

Air quality advisories extended through the California's San Joaquin Valley and as far as the San Francisco Bay Area to Denver, Salt Lake City and Las Vegas, where residents were urged to keep their windows and doors shut. Denver's air quality ranked among the worst in the world Saturday afternoon.



A Washington Ridge hand crew continues to mop up hot spots of the River Fire Friday, Aug. 6, 2021 in Chicago Park, Calif. Firefighters are gaining the upper hand on the fast-moving River Fire that broke out Wednesday near the town of Colfax and destroyed nearly 90 homes and other buildings. More than 5,000 people were ordered to evacuate in Placer and Nevada counties, state fire officials said. Credit: Elias Funez/The Union via AP



Healdsburg firefighter Justin Potter rests as his crew prepares to battle the Dixie Fire in the Clear Creek community of Lassen County, Calif., on Friday, Aug. 6, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



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Jackie Armstrong, a Chester resident evacuated from the Dixie Fire, speaks with daughter Zoey Armstrong, 3, at a Susanville, Calif., evacuation shelter on Friday, Aug. 6, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



April Phillips, a Chester resident evacuated from the Dixie Fire, holds her dog Sissy Lala at a Susanville, Calif., evacuation shelter on Friday, Aug. 6, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Greenville resident Kesia Studebaker, who lost her home to the Dixie Fire, secures belongings before leaving a Susanville, Calif., evacuee shelter with her dog Logan on Friday, Aug. 6, 2021. "I lost everything. This is all I've got," said Studebaker adding "It's a new beginning, a new adventure." She was heading out to stay with friends nearby. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Ruthann Robinson, a Chester resident evacuated from the Dixie Fire, hugs Jackie Armstrong at a Susanville, Calif., evacuation shelter on Friday, Aug. 6, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



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An ornament rests in front of a Greenville home destroyed by the Dixie Fire in Plumas County, Calif., on Friday, Aug. 6, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Firefighters battling the Dixie Fire clear Highway 89 after a burned tree fell across the roadway in Plumas County, Calif., on Friday, Aug. 6, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

California's fire season is on track to surpass last year's season, which was the worst fire season in recent recorded state history.

Since the start of the year, more than 6,000 blazes have destroyed more than 1,260 square miles (3,260 square kilometers) of land—more than triple the losses for the same period in 2020, according to state [fire](#) figures.

California's raging wildfires were among 107 large fires burning across 14 states, mostly in the West, where historic drought conditions have left

lands parched and ripe for ignition.

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