

Devastating wildfires advancing through Northern California

August 18 2021, by Terence Chea, Ethan Swope and John Antczak



Seen in a long exposure photograph, embers light up hillsides as the Dixie Fire burns near Milford in Lassen County, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

Wind-driven wildfires raged Wednesday through drought-stricken forests in the mountains of Northern California after incinerating

hundreds of homes and forcing thousands of people to flee to safety.

A reversal of wind direction was expected to test some previously quiet fire containment lines, but also push flames back in other areas, authorities said.

The newest inferno, the Caldor Fire, continued to grow explosively in the Sierra Nevada southwest of Lake Tahoe, covering 84 square miles (217.5 square kilometers) after suddenly ravaging Grizzly Flats, a community of about 1,200.

At least 50 homes burned there but tallies were incomplete because officials had not been able to make thorough assessments of the damage in Grizzly Flats. Two people were hospitalized with serious injuries on Tuesday and about 5,900 homes and other structures were threatened by the fire.

In the Sierra-Cascades region about 100 miles (161 kilometers) to the north, the month-old Dixie Fire expanded by thousands of acres to 993 square miles (2,572 square kilometers)—two weeks after the blaze gutted the Gold Rush-era town of Greenville. About 16,000 homes and buildings were threatened by the Dixie Fire, named for the road where it started.



Jennifer Whitmore sprays her home with water as the Caldor fire burns near White Hall, Calif., Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ethan Swope

"It's a pretty good size monster," Mark Brunton, a firefighting operations section chief, said in a briefing.

"We're not going to get this thing overnight," he said. "It's going to be a work in progress—eating the elephant one bite at a time kind of thing—and it's going to be a long-haul mindset. It's a marathon and not a sprint."

The Caldor and Dixie fires are among a dozen large wildfires in the

northern half of California. In contrast, Southern California has had few wildfires recently. Very moist ocean air even ushered in occasional drizzle or light rain on Wednesday.

But Northern California's wildfires have left scenes of utter devastation.

Few homes were left standing in Grizzly Flats, where streets were littered with downed power lines and poles. Houses were reduced to smoldering ash and twisted metal with only chimneys rising above the ruins. A post office and elementary school were destroyed.



Jennifer Whitmore sprays her home with water as the Caldor fire burns near White Hall, Calif., Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ethan Swope

Hulks of gutted vehicles littered the ruins and the skeletons of chairs stood in rows among the ashes of a church.

Derek Shaves, who fled Grizzly Flats late Monday, said he visited the next day, finding that his home and most of the houses in his neighborhood were gone.

"It's a pile of ash," he said. "Everybody on my block is a pile of ash and every block that I visited—but for five separate homes that were safe—was totally devastated."

All 7,000 residents of the town of Pollock Pines on Tuesday were ordered to evacuate because of the fire.

To the north at the Dixie Fire, numerous firefighting resources were deployed into the area of Susanville, a city of about 18,000 a few miles from the northeastern edge of the blaze, where residents have been warned to be ready to evacuate.

Fire officials said early Wednesday that the fire did not push toward Susanville overnight, and that was one location where the switch in wind direction to the northeast could push flames back on themselves.



Destiney Barnard holds Raymond William Goetchius while stranded at a gas station near the Dixie Fire on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021, in Doyle, Calif. Barnard was helping Goetchius and his family evacuate from Susanville when her car broke down. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

Late Tuesday, Pacific Gas & Electric began shutting off power to as many as 51,000 customers in 18 Northern California counties to prevent wildfires for the first time since last year's historically bad fire season.

The utility said the shutoffs were focused in the Sierra Nevada foothills, the North Coast, the northern Central Valley and the North San Francisco Bay mountains and could last into Wednesday afternoon.

The nation's largest utility announced the blackouts as a precaution to

prevent gusts from damaging power lines and sparking blazes.

PG&E has notified utility regulators that the Dixie fire may have been caused by trees falling into its power lines. The Dixie Fire began near the town of Paradise, which was devastated by a 2018 wildfire ignited by PG&E equipment during strong winds. Eighty-five people died.



Susanville residents sit in the back of a pick-up truck while stranded outside the Dixie Fire zone on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021, in Doyle, Calif. The car they were using to evacuate broke down on the way out. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



A man douses flames as the Dixie Fire burns south of Janesville in Lassen County, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region has spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



The moon rises over flames as the Dixie Fire burns in Lassen County, Calif., on Monday, Aug. 16, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region has spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Jason Tow speaks with a firefighter as the Dixie Fire burns near his home in Lassen County, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region has spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



The Dixie Fire burns across Highway 395 south of Janesville in Lassen County, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region has spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Jason Tow makes a phone call as the Dixie Fire burns near his home south of Janesville in Lassen County, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region has spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



A bulldozer creates a firebreak as the Dixie Fire burns south of Janesville in Lassen County, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region has spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Flames from Dixie Fire rise above a truck in Lassen County, Calif., on early Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region has spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



A firefighter battles the Dixie Fire shortly after it jumped Highway 395 south of Janesville in Lassen County, Calif., on Monday, Aug. 16, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region threatens to spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



The Dixie Fire burns south of Janesville in Lassen County, Calif., on early Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region has spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Flames from the Dixie Fire leap over Highway 395 south of Janesville in Lassen County, Calif., on early Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Critical fire weather throughout the region has spread multiple wildfires burning in Northern California. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



A scorched property, destroyed by the Caldor Fire, sits in Grizzly Flats, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ethan Swope



The remnants of a foundation is all this left after a property was destroyed by the Caldor Fire in Grizzly Flats, Calif., on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ethan Swope



U.S. EPA Administrator Michael Regan looks over Big Basin Redwoods State Park near Boulder Creek, Calif., Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Nic Coury



U.S. EPA Administrator Michael Regan talks to reporters at Big Basin Redwoods State Park near Boulder Creek, Calif., Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Nic Coury



California Gov. Gavin Newsom looks over Big Basin Redwoods State Park near Boulder Creek, Calif., Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Nic Coury



California Gov. Gavin Newsom, second from left, and U.S. EPA Administrator Michael Regan, left, talks with fire officials at Big Basin Redwoods State Park near Boulder Creek, Calif., Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Nic Coury

The Dixie Fire is the largest of nearly 100 major wildfires burning across a dozen Western states, including Alaska. The wildfires, in large part, have been fueled by high temperatures, strong winds and dry weather.

Climate change has made the U.S. West warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.

This story corrects that the Dixie and Caldor fires are more than 100 miles (161 kilometers) apart, not a few miles.

© 2021 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Devastating wildfires advancing through Northern California (2021, August 18)
retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-08-devastating-wildfires-advancing-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.