

Wildfire levels historic California town as residents flee blaze

August 5 2021, by Josh Edelson



Buildings burn as the Dixie Fire tears through downtown Greenville, California on August 4, 2021.

The largest wildfire in California has razed a small town in the state's parched northeast, warping street lights and destroying historic buildings

hours after residents were ordered to flee.

Greenville, an Indian Valley settlement of a few hundred people dating back to the mid-1800s Gold Rush, was engulfed by flames as winds whipped the inferno towards the community, turning the sky orange.

"I'd say the majority of downtown Greenville is completely destroyed," tweeted wildfire photographer Stuart Palley, sharing images of the devastation.

"My heart is broken for this beautiful little town."

The Dixie Fire has been raging in the forests of northern California since mid-July, part of a climate crisis that has brought sweltering heat and an alarming drought.

Authorities had earlier issued evacuation alerts to residents, as [high winds](#) fanned the [fire](#) which, at 500 square miles (1,300 sq km), has grown to more than seven times the size of the US capital, Washington.

The blaze is so big that it has been generating its own weather system.

"We did everything we could," California Fire spokesman Mitch Matlow told reporters. "Sometimes it's just not enough."

Images taken by an AFP photographer showed the fire's heat had bent [street lights](#) to the ground, with only a few structures still standing.



Winds of up to 35 mph fanned the flames of the Dixie Fire, the largest blaze in the California.

A gas station, a hotel and a bar were destroyed, as well as many buildings that were more than a century old.

The fire entered the town at roughly 4:00 pm Wednesday (2300 GMT) according to Jake Cagle, incident management team operations section chief.

He said firefighters were struggling with those not obeying evacuation orders, leading to them having to divert time and resources to rescue people in the path of the flames.

"It's just intense fire behavior, and it's not what we're used to," he said.

"Firefighters are fighting for the town of Greenville," US Forest Service spokeswoman Pandora Valle told the San Francisco Chronicle late Wednesday, but was unable to give further details.

'Imminent danger'

The Plumas County Sheriff's Department issued an evacuation order late Tuesday for the 2,000 or so residents of Chester to flee the area.



A gas station, a hotel and a bar were destroyed in Greenville, California, as well as many buildings that were more than a century old.

"If you remained you should evacuate to the EAST, IMMEDIATELY!" the sheriff's department posted on their official Facebook page Wednesday.

"If you cannot evacuate and you are threatened by fire and can safely get there, take refuge at the Chester High School baseball field!"

In a second warning on [social media](#), the department added: "If you are still in the Greenville area, you are in imminent danger and you MUST leave now!!"

"If you remain, [emergency responders](#) may not be able to assist you."

By late July, the number of acres burned in California was up more than 250 percent from 2020—itself the worst year of wildfires in the state's [modern history](#).

The Dixie Fire has evoked painful memories of the Paradise Fire, the deadliest blaze in California's recent history.

Faulty power lines sparked the inferno, which swept through the northern town of Paradise in 2018, killing 86 people. Pacific Gas and Electric, California's largest energy utility firm, was deemed responsible.



The heat from the Dixie Fire bent street lights to the ground, as the blaze tore through Greenville, California.



Fire Battalion Chief Sergio Mora looks on as the Dixie Fire burns through downtown Greenville, California.

PG&E equipment is again being blamed for the Dixie Fire, after a tree fell on a power conductor the day the blaze began.

The utility announced in late July it will bury 10,000 miles (16,000 kilometers) of power lines in a massive bid to prevent its equipment from igniting more deadly wildfires.

Greenville itself is no stranger to fire disasters. A catastrophic blaze destroyed much of the town in 1881 and several major infernos have threatened residents in the intervening 140 years.

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