

With wildfire threatening, Lake Tahoe prepares for emergency

August 27 2021, by Sam Metz and Brian Melley



A firefighter tries to extinguish the flames at a burning house as the South Fire burns in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu

The decision to flee their home Thursday in the mountains above Lake

Tahoe became clear when Johnny White and Lauren McCauley could see flames on the webcam at their local ski resort.

Even as ash rained down under a cloud of heavy smoke, the couple wasn't panicked because they had an early warning to leave their home near Echo Summit, about 10 miles (16 kilometers) south of the [lake](#), and wanted to avoid last-minute pandemonium if the wildfire continued its march toward the [tourist destination](#) on the California and Nevada border.

"You don't want everyone in the basin panicking and scrambling to try and leave at the same time," McCauley said.

Firefighters were facing changing weather conditions that could push the [fire](#) closer to the Tahoe Basin, a home to thousands and recreational playground for millions of tourists who visit the [alpine lake](#) in summer, ski at the many resorts in winter and gamble at its casinos year-round.

Winds and temperatures were expected to pick up in coming days while humidity drops, said Daniel Berlant, assistant deputy director of the state firefighting agency.

"That's what's closing the window of opportunity we've had to make progress and really get hold of the fire," Berlant said.



A U.S. Forest Service bulletin board displays information about closures and evacuations at the Lake Valley Fire District Headquarters in Meyers, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 26, 2021. California weather is heating up and winds are shifting as more than 14,000 firefighters battled wildfires up and down the state, including a major blaze they hoped to keep out of the Lake Tahoe resort region. Credit: AP Photo/Sam Metz

Echo Summit, a mountain pass where cliff-hanging U.S. Route 50 begins its descent toward Lake Tahoe, is where firefighters plan to make their stand if the Caldor Fire keeps burning through dense forest in the Sierra Nevada.

"Everything's holding real good along Highway 50," said Cal Fire Operations Section Chief Cody Bogan. "The fire has been backing down

real slowly ... we've just been allowing it to do it on its own speed. It's working in our favor."

The fire is one of nearly 90 large blazes in the U.S. There were more than a dozen big fires in California, including one that destroyed 18 homes in Southern California, which has so far escaped the scale of wildfires plaguing the north all summer.

A new fire broke out Thursday in the Sierra foothills forcing evacuations near the historic Gold Rush town of Sonora, just dozens of miles from Yosemite National Park.



Flames from the French Fire consume a cabin on Highway 155 in Sequoia National Forest, Calif., on Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger

Fires in California have destroyed around 2,000 structures and forced thousands to evacuate while also blanketing large swaths of the West in unhealthy smoke.

Climate change has made the 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.

The Caldor Fire has been the nation's top firefighting priority because of its proximity to Lake Tahoe, where its tourist economy should be in full swing this time of year.

"This is the week before Labor Day weekend—a busy weekend, normally," South Lake Tahoe City Manager Joe Irvin said. "That is not going to be the case this year."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency noted in a report on the fire that "social, political, and economic concerns will increase as the fire progresses toward the Lake Tahoe Basin." The agency did not immediately respond to a request to elaborate beyond that statement.



A firefighter works on a burning house as the South Fire burns in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu

Visitors are still crowding the highway that loops the massive lake and riding bikes and walking the beaches, but many are wearing masks. The lake, known for its water clarity and the granite peaks that surround it, has been shrouded in dense smoke that has reached hazardous levels.

The Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority reversed its advice from earlier in the week and recommended tourists postpone their travel. Previously the group that promotes tourism on the south side of the lake advised letting visitors decide whether to cancel their trips amid smoke and approaching fire.

Carol Chaplin, the president and CEO, said hotels and lodges were in lockstep with public safety officials.

"They understand that this is not the experience that their guests are used to or look forward to," she said.

Irvin issued an emergency proclamation Thursday so the city that's home to Heavenly Ski Resort can be better prepared if evacuation orders come and be reimbursed for related expenses.



The French Fire burns along Highway 155 in Sequoia National Forest, Calif., on Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



A firefighter tries to extinguish the flames at a burning house as the South Fire burns in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Homeowners Jose Lamas, center, his wife, Maria Covarrubias, right, and his daughter Astrid Covarrubias walk through the smoke after visiting their burned-out home from the South Fire in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Vehicles are seen burning as the South Fire burns in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Homeowner Jose Lamas, right, and his daughter Astrid Covarrubias survey the charred debris left in his burned-out home from the South Fire in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021.
Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Homeowner Maria Covarrubias reacts after seeing her home burn down from the South Fire in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Firefighters watch as a helicopter drops water at the South Fire burning in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



A firefighter tries to extinguish the flames at a burning house as the South Fire burns in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



A firefighter tries to extinguish the flames at a burning house as the South Fire burns in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



A sculpture is seen at a burning house as the South Fire burns in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021.
Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Firefighters watch as the South Fire burns in Lytle Creek, San Bernardino County, north of Rialto, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Flames from the French Fire consume a structure on Highway 155 in Sequoia National Forest, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



A fire truck moves to a safer position as the French Fire jumps Highway 155 near Alta Sierra in Sequoia National Forest, Calif., on Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger



Animals stand near a fence while a firefighter works to extinguish flames from the South Fire, at a farm in Lytle Creek, near Rialto, Calif., in San Bernardino County on Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



A firefighter is silhouetted while extinguishing hotspots from the South Fire in Lytle Creek, near Rialto, Calif., in San Bernardino County on Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Smoke rises from the mountains as the South fire burns in San Bernardino County north of Rialto, Calif., seen from Fontana, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. In Southern California, an unknown number of remote homes and outbuildings burned after a fire broke out Wednesday afternoon and quickly ran through tinder-dry brush in mountains northeast of Los Angeles. Evacuations were ordered, and crews mounted an air attack to keep the South Fire from the tiny communities of Lytle Creek and Scotland near the Cajon Pass in San Bernardino County. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo Chiu



Firefighters take a rest while working against the South Fire in Lytle Creek, near Rialto, Calif., in San Bernardino County on Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



A small fire burns in the shell of a vehicle near a burning house at the South Fire in Lytle Creek near Rialto, Calif., in San Bernardino County on Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Retired Lake Valley Fire District Captain Scott Swift, right, shows a photo of long branches left out in Meyers, Calif., Thursday, Aug. 26, 2021. The small town south of Lake Tahoe is under an evacuation warning as the Caldor Fire nears the alpine resort. on Thursday, Aug. 26, 2021. California weather is heating up and winds are shifting as more than 14,000 firefighters battled wildfires up and down the state, including a major blaze they hoped to keep out of the Lake Tahoe resort region. Credit: AP Photo/Sam Metz



Drivers wash the inside and outside of their vehicle as ash and smoke rains down from the Caldor Fire in South Lake Tahoe, Calif., Thursday, Aug. 26, 2021. California weather is heating up and winds are shifting as more than 14,000 firefighters battled wildfires up and down the state, including a major blaze they hoped to keep out of the Lake Tahoe resort region. Credit: AP Photo/Sam Metz

The last time the city declared a wildfire emergency was during the 2007 Angora Fire, which destroyed nearly 250 homes in neighboring Meyers and was the last major fire in the basin.

Not far from the neighborhood that was largely wiped out in that fire, residents hurried to clear pine cones and needles from their roofs and gutters to prepare for the possibility of fire.

The Angora Fire, which was driven by strong winds and took residents by surprise, burned just 3,100 acres, fewer than 5 square miles.

The Caldor Fire has burned over 139,000 acres—or 218 square miles (565 square kilometers)—and was only 12% contained Thursday.

Retired fire district captain Joe McAvoy, who lost his own home in the fire, said wildfires larger than 100,000 acres were once-in-a-lifetime events in his career. Not anymore.

"Now it seems like they're all 100,000 acres," McAvoy said. It's way more extreme. ... Now (fires) are 100,000 acres and it's like, 'Oh, yeah, big deal.' You know, it's every fire."

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