

Lowline fire expanding north of Gunnison as firefighters retreat and set backfires

August 1 2023, by Bruce Finley, The Denver Post



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The lightning-sparked Lowline fire burning in western Colorado north of Gunnison has expanded to 1,331 acres as firefighters retreat and set deliberate backfires in an effort to reduce thick fallen trees in the

forests.

And federal land managers on Monday said they anticipate eventual ecological benefits.

The [fire](#) is burning on public land managed by the U.S. Forest Service 14 miles north of Gunnison, and on recent hot days, embers spread, igniting spot fires in [forest areas](#) that [firefighters](#) could not safely reach. The back-burning tactic is intended to deny approaching flames fuel so that the fire eventually can be contained. It grew by more than 300 acres over the weekend, according to the latest aerial infrared mapping.

"In places where we can't safely insert firefighters, we are backing off—areas where heavy trees have come down," said Rick Barton, spokesman for the interagency team of 419 firefighters tasked with suppressing the fire.

"You will see increased acreage in the days to come. But that doesn't mean that the main fire is making a run. It means we are backing off and burning off fuel from our existing control lines," Barton said.

Firefighting commanders also were counting on rain, forecast for Monday afternoon and later this week, to help control the fire.

No buildings have burned, and no injuries have been reported since land managers discovered the fire on July 26. Helicopters hauling large buckets of water have helped squelch flames. Gunnison County authorities evacuated residents of ten homes along County Road 818. The residents at about 40 other homes have been told to be ready to evacuate.

The fire burned on a ridge, at an elevation of 9,400 feet, between Squirrel and Mill creeks. It has been kicking up smoke as flames

smolder in dead and fallen trees. On Monday, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment officials issued an air quality alert, advising residents around Gunnison to stay indoors when smoke becomes thick, effective through Aug. 11.

Federal officials declared a full suppression approach to the fire and deployed bulldozers to dig buffers on land near cabins and ranches. "The fire is still moving in some areas. It is moving more into the forests. We're trying to keep it away from cabins, homes, the ranches in the area, subdivisions," Barton said, estimating the Lowline fire won't be fully contained for several weeks.

"It depends on how much rain we get."

Over decades, the forests here have grown dense. Fire plays a natural role in maintaining the [ecological balance](#) in forests. Federal officials on Monday said the Lowline fire will help in the long run by restoring health in the areas that have burned.

"Because it has been mostly a low-intensity fire, is good for us. It is cleaning up a lot of the dead and downed material. It is going to make the whole area more healthy," Barton said. "We're not managing it for that purpose. We are doing full suppression. But there are going to be some good ecological benefits out of this fire."

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