

Wildfires rampage across northern California

15 September 2015, by Josh Edelson



A house is engulfed in flames as firefighters attempt to put it out during the Valley fire in Seigler Springs, California on September 13, 2015

Firefighters on Monday battled devastating wildfires that have reduced hundreds of homes to smoldering ruins and threatened California's renowned wine region.

State disaster officials said the fast-moving infernos had consumed more than 100,000 acres (more than 50,000 hectares), forcing thousands to flee their homes and reportedly killing one person.

Daniel Berlant, spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire), said the blazes were still spreading due to winds.

"Winds are pushing south and there are new evacuations on the northern edge of the Valley Fire," he said, referring to one of two areas particularly devastated by the flames.

Among the hardest hit areas is Lake County, where the hamlet of Middletown was devastated by

the flames that left an apocalyptic scene.

An AFP reporter who visited the town saw smoldering homes, melted vehicles and downed power lines.

"There is metal dripping off the cars because of the heat," he said.

About a mile out of the town lay a dead horse by the side of the road.

Local media said one person had been confirmed dead but there were no immediate details on the identity of the victim or the circumstances in which she died.

The Valley fire is located about 100 miles (160 kilometers) west of the state capital Sacramento and the second major inferno—the Butte fire—about 100 miles to the east.

"The fires are spreading faster than I have seen in my 30 years," Mark Ghilarducci, the state's emergency services chief, told The Sacramento Bee newspaper.

More than 11,000 firefighters are battling 12 large fires across California.



Burned out vehicles are surrounded by smoldering rubble while firefighters continue to battle the Valley fire in Middletown, California on September 13, 2015

Citing the widespread destruction, Governor Jerry Brown on Sunday declared a state of emergency for Lake and Napa counties—wine-producing regions north of San Francisco. Area schools were also closed on Monday.

"My heart goes out to all those who lost homes and businesses in the devastating fires in California," state senator Barbara Boxer said in a tweet.

"Praying for the safety of all."

The recent fires have been fueled by tinder-dry conditions across the western United States, which has been starved for rain for the past several years.

The prolonged dry spell has been exacerbated by record high temperatures, which many environmentalists blame on global warming.

Nine times size of Manhattan



A statue is seen amidst rubble from a burned home during the Valley fire in Middletown, California on September 13, 2015

Berlant said the Valley fire has so far consumed 61,000 acres (24,685 hectares), and was only five percent contained with 1,200 firefighters mobilized to tackle it.

The 4,400 firefighters combatting the Butte fire have had more success. That blaze has consumed some 70,000 acres, but is now about 30 percent contained.

Together the twin blazes have destroyed an area nine times the size of Manhattan.

About 6,400 homes are still threatened by these monster fires, Berlant said, although some evacuation orders linked to the Butte fire have been lifted.



Burned vehicles sit at a property charred by the Valley fire in Middletown, California on September 13, 2015

Three other fires are scorching the earth in neighboring Oregon state and 10 further north in Washington state.

While temperatures are cooler than in the past week, conditions remain extremely dry, which allow fires to burn at a rapid rate.

Nearly 70 firefighters from Australia and New Zealand are assisting [fire](#) services in the western United States.

National Guard troops have also been called in to help.

Berlant said Cal Fire so far spent more than \$212 million since July 1 to fight fires under its jurisdiction.



A firefighter douses flames from a backfire while battling the Butte fire near San Andreas, California on September 12, 2015

The costs of containing other fires, such as those blazing in Sierra Nevada forests, are largely covered by federal agencies and not included in those figures.

The US Forest Service has spent an additional \$1.31 billion battling fires and says it is approaching its record expenditure, from 2002, of \$1.65 billion.

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