

Wildfires can happen anywhere – be ready

By Teri Mizuhara

Even professionals can find it difficult to comprehend the speed at which a wildfire can move, so for the public it can be tough to understand it unless you have witnessed it firsthand.

With any luck, you may never have such a life changing experience.

Trying to predict what causes a small wildland fire in the neighborhood to grow to one of the largest wildland fires in the state's history is challenging. The Rim Fire is burning in terrain similar to what we find in Amador and El Dorado counties, so it is a short leap to think, it could happen here.

CalFire Unit Chief Kelly Keenan of the Amador-El Dorado-Sacramento Unit emphasizes that, "I imagine the residents of Tuolumne County never thought it could really happen to them, or that the Rim Fire could have burned 255,858 acres (400 square miles) in 28 days, but it has with ferocity that one seldom sees. With 80 percent of the fire contained, the third largest wildfire in the state's history is still spotting ahead of itself and causing Yosemite National Park to close four of its campgrounds and the Stanislaus National Forest to close two of its ranger districts not to mention the road closures in the area."

The Rim Fire illustrates the intensity of a wildland fire and how quickly it can increase in size. At its height, between Aug. 22-23, it was burning an average of 36 acres every single minute for a total of 51,754 acres in 24 hours.

These type fires can create their own weather, consume all the vegetation in their path and, when hot enough, create a water repellent or hydrophobic condition in the soils that can impede the re growth of the forest.

To illustrate just how quickly a wildfire can move, take a look at the Rim Fire stats:

Aug. 17 at 3:25pm the fire is reported.

Aug. 18 about 15 hours after the first report the fire is 200 acres and zero percent contained.

Aug. 19 at 7am the fire has quadrupled in size to 800 acres.

Aug. 20 at 7am the fire grew nearly 13 times its size in 24 hours to 10,170 acres.

Aug. 21 at 7am the fire has grown over 50 percent and is 16,228 acres.

Aug. 22 at 7am the fire more than tripled in size in 24 hours for a total of 53,866 acres.

Aug. 23 at 7am the fire nearly doubled in size again to 105,620 acres and 2 percent containment

Aug. 24 at 7pm the fire grew another 24,000 acres to 129,620 and 7 percent containment.

Sept. 13 at 7am the fire is now 255,858 acres (400 square miles) and 80 percent contained and has become the third largest wildland fire in the history of California since 1932, it is still not 100 percent contained.

Unfortunately, too often we hear people say, "my neighborhood has never had a fire like that so I don't have to worry about it" or "I live in a million dollar home with a manicured landscape" somehow trusting that these unfounded beliefs will prevent them from becoming a victim of a wildland fire. But

the truth is, every year we witness a neighborhood with “no fire history” subject to a catastrophic fire and million dollar homes with manicured landscaping destroyed in wildland fires.

Ignoring wildland fire potential is not the answer. We have all consciously chosen a lifestyle here in the Sierra, whether it is the rolling grasslands of the front country or the forested timberlands at elevation; we live in an area that is historically prone to wildland fires. We accept these risks but with that risk we also need to accept the responsibility of doing all we can to protect ourselves when a wildfire occurs.

Please go online for more information on what you can do to increase your fire safety, defensible space, and disaster preparedness.

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