

Residents returning home; Sand Fire 75% contained

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

Firefighters gained the upper hand Monday on a nearly 4,000-acre wildfire in El Dorado and Amador counties, allowing a procession of displaced homeowners to return as most evacuation orders were lifted on the fire's fourth day.

People returning to the communities of Fair Play, Mount Aukum and Somerset in southern El Dorado County hauled horse trailers back on country roads. They passed signs reading, "Thank you, firefighters, for valiant efforts saving homes," and "We love our firefighters."

In the blaze that destroyed 51 structures, including 13 residences, most people could celebrate over returning to the same homes and lives they left behind.

On Monday, fire officials said the risk had diminished considerably from the Sand fire. The blaze, declared 75 percent contained as of Monday evening, wasn't spreading. But fire crews, reaching nearly 2,000 personnel, were still attacking hot spots. And the blaze may not be completely extinguished until Aug. 1, officials said.

"The fire is not getting any bigger," said Ventura County Fire Capt. Ron Oatman, serving as a spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. "But it's still not fully contained. Even though we don't have active flames, we have to secure the entire perimeter."

Authorities have blamed the fire, still under investigation, on a vehicle driving into brush near Sand Ridge Road and Highway 49. The brush was believed to have caught fire, engulfing the vehicle in flames as the blaze spread. No injury

was reported.

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