

Eastern Sierra residents return to charred neighborhoods

By Kristin J. Bender and Michelle Rindels, AP

More than 200 residents of two communities ravaged by a wildfire along the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada were allowed to return home Monday to an area that could see more wildfires as the state enters its fourth year of drought.

People whose homes were not destroyed have been allowed back. The owners of the 40 homes that were destroyed by the fire in Swall Meadows and nearby Paradise will be allowed to come and go to salvage what they can, said CalFire Capt. Liz Brown.

Brown said the towns are open only to residents.

Four firefighters were injured battling the wind-driven fire, but the injuries were minor, Brown said.

A three-year drought across California has created extremely dry timber brush that fueled the flames and pushed them all the way up the Sierra slopes to the snow line around 8,000 feet.

The fire started Friday afternoon near a highway on the border of Inyo and Mono counties. It blew up when 50 to 75 mph winds whipped through wooded areas near the two communities for about three hours, Brown said.

Quick evacuations made getting the firefighting started easier. "We are so grateful (people) left when we asked them to," Brown said. "People listened, they left and we are able to focus on the firefighting."

The cause of the fire remains under investigation, and

authorities don't yet have a tally of the damage, Brown said.

Firefighters made progress, and they have since contained 95 percent of the blaze that has charred about 7,000 acres. Smoking debris on hillsides does not pose a threat to homes or other structures, authorities said.

This current fire could be contained by Tuesday afternoon, but others may soon follow.

"The threat (of a wildfire) is there all year round," Brown said. "There are just peak periods when it's a little more dry and dangerous."

Although Monday was dry with high winds expected and no rain in the forecast, firefighters are being extra cautious. "When the wind comes up, we are going to be on high alert to make sure we don't have more issues," Brown said.

More than 500 fire crews battled the blaze over the past few days.

Utility workers tended to the charred power poles along the roads in the two towns, and forestry crews sawed at fallen trees that blocked a main thoroughfare. Nearby, two gutted, gray trucks rested on a driveway that led to a pile of rubble.

Meanwhile, officials running the evacuation center in Crowley Lake said they received an outpouring of support. Pizzas, fresh fruit and a birthday cake collected on a folding table, while a white board filled up with the names and phone numbers of people who had volunteered their homes for displaced people and pets.