

Washington Fire containment may take weeks



The Washington Fire burns on a ridge June 25 with no visible sign of fire personnel. Photo/Carolyn E. Wright/Copyright

Updated 9:50pm

The fire has burned 17,622 acres and is 29 percent contained.

“The availability of water to support firefighting efforts is a concern in large portions of the West this year. Thanks to a generous donation by Park Ranch and support from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife the use of Heenan Lake water is contributing to the suppression of the Washington Fire,” officials said.

Nearly 1,200 people are fighting the fire.

By Susan Wood

MARKLEEVILLE – As the day turned to night, the crackling of fire against dry fuel on a treacherous, steep ridge above layers of heavy smoke overshadowed the beauty of a bucolic meadow where crickets chirped and displaced deer tried to find refuge.

This Washington Fire has had Markleeville on edge since it erupted nearly a week ago. It started about eight miles south of town off Highway 4 along Wolf Creek Road in the Carson Iceberg Wilderness where historic cabins dot a pristine landscape. It is now within three miles of the town.

The fire was caused by a lightning strike from a storm about 10 days before it was detected, according to officials. The exact date is still being determined.



White ash fills the nearly 17,000-acre landscape burned by the Washington Fire. Photo/Carolyn E. Wright/Copyright

As of Thursday night, the time line in which fire agencies responded to the fire had not been released to *Lake Tahoe News* despite repeated requests.

Larry Lucas, U.S. Forest Service spokesman, said signs of smoke were first reported by the duty officer to the fire management officer of the Forest Service office in Markleeville at 6:10pm on June 19. USFS firehouses are not staffed around the clock. Alpine County has a volunteer fire department.

Tactical team Division Chief Kevin Kutterer, who works for the Bureau of Land Management, said he wanted more personnel and equipment to work with when he arrived.

“Our most challenging thing was the lack of resources like hand crews,” Kutterer told *Lake Tahoe News* on June 25 while leading a crew up the long, arduous drive along Wolf Creek.



Inmates, based at Turtle Rock Park, get dinner June 25 after working the fire line. Photo/Carolyn E. Wright/Copyright

The feds have diverted many resources to Alaska, which is

being blanketed with fires. He also cited the steep, rocky terrain as a hindrance.

Kutterer expects full containment could take a few weeks as firefighters battle the elements and conditions to get a grip on the stubborn blaze. His sense of optimism seemed dwarfed by the fire's back-and-forth nature and the immensity of the work ahead of his crews.

"The winds could kick up anytime," he said.

The terrain's densely forested areas will require much monitoring, he pointed out.

The wildland fire as of Thursday night had consumed nearly 17,000 acres.

Early on nearby campgrounds were evacuated. Markleeville has been turned into a ghost town even though mandatory evacuations are not in place. Turtle Rock Campground on Highway 89 has been turned into a small village of firefighters. Shift changes have some spending the night there, others resting in little coves along Highway 4 and the core backpacking or flown deep into the fire line.

Firefighters have been battling the original fire and spot blazes in an attempt to keep the flames from the town and away from the 15 historic buildings and cabins tucked in the trees. A fire truck on the night of June 25 was parked next to one of the nicer cabins along Wolf Creek Road.



Ebbetts Pass is closed, as are other roads in the burn area. Photo/Carolyn E. Wright/Copyright

More than 900 people have been assigned to fight the Alpine County fire, with 50 engines, 12 water tenders, eight air tankers and 11 helicopters supporting the effort.

The hard-earned suppression push paid off Thursday with low winds. The break was well needed because containment has represented a seesaw between 10 percent to zero and back up to 15 percent containment by the evening.

Forecasts for Friday call for a chance of dry thunderstorms with winds picking up to 15 mph.

Highways 4 and 89 remain closed for public safety reasons.

The Carson Valley has been enshrouded in smoke for most of the week as winds burn the fire and smoke northeast. Smoke inundated Incline Village on Thursday and reached Truckee, too.

Fire restrictions go into effect for western Nevada and

eastern California Friday, the Forest Service reported Thursday.