

Calif. meets drought-fueled fire season with extra crews



Additional crews on many fire lines are inmates. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

By Janie Har, Associated Press

LAKEPORT — f.

They bunk in tight sleepers and eat in a big mess hall. They depart in the mornings with enormous high-calorie sack lunches of sandwiches and cookies as others come back tired, footsore and hungry to their makeshift base at the Lake County fairgrounds.

The National Interagency Fire Center in Idaho has listed the fire 110 miles north of San Francisco as the nation's highest priority for crews and equipment. It is the largest of 23 fires statewide and takes up nearly a third of the 10,000 firefighters dispatched in California, which has become tinder box amid years of drought.

The good news is state fire officials prepared for a drought-fueled fire season and staffed up early with several hundred more firefighters than previous years, CalFire spokesman Daniel Berlant said.

"We're definitely at a medium to high level of activity but we're not at extreme, where we are low on resources by any means," he said. "That helps us out if there are new fires."

Across the U.S., 118 fires are burning on 2,757 square miles, according to the Idaho fire center. About 17,200 people are fighting those fires, but resources are not tapped out yet, center spokeswoman Robyn Broyles said. If civilian crews run low, officials can call on national guard and military crews.

August is the height of fire season, and while the number of fires nationally is below average, the 9,361 square miles burned to date is about 50 percent above average. Most of that – 7,731 square miles – has been in Alaska.

On Wednesday, evacuation orders for a small Washington town were lifted after a fast-growing wildfire bypassed the community.

Fire spokesman Ron Fryer said people were being allowed back into their homes in Roosevelt, about 120 miles east of Portland, Oregon. He said the grass fire that began Tuesday has grown to 26 square miles.

In California, CalFire has responded to 4,200 fires this year – 1,500 more than average, Berlant said.

The biggest is in rugged terrain in Lake, Yolo and Colusa counties, and its cause is under investigation. More than 13,000 people have been required or urged to leave their homes, cabins and campsites, and at least 39 homes have been destroyed.

Some of the 3,400 firefighters on the blaze have been here

since it started a week ago. The fire, which was 30 percent contained Wednesday night, isn't expected to be fully corralled until at least Monday.

As much as crews love the work, fatigue inevitably sets in.

"This is our seventh day," said Seaton King, a battalion chief with the Pasadena Fire Department. He returned from a shift protecting structures and cutting low tree limbs.

"You kind of get used to it, but it's still taxing in terms of being up and available for those 24-hour work cycles."

California fire officials say their biggest concern is that forecasts call for lightning that could spark more blazes.

Since July 1, when the new fiscal year started, CalFire estimates it has spent \$63 million battling large wildfires. Last fiscal year, it spent an estimated \$434 million.

Bills for firefighting are adding up across the country. On Wednesday, the U.S. Forest Service released a report showing rising firefighting costs are affecting national forest conservation, restoration, recreation and management programs.

Firefighting costs now consume more than 50 percent of the Forest Service's budget, compared with just 16 percent in 1995. They are expected to comprise two-thirds of its budget in 10 years if left unaddressed.

At the fire camp here Wednesday, freshly returned firefighters in blue sat at long tables and dug into bowls of fruit, corned beef hash and fried eggs. They told jokes and drank coffee named after Justin Bieber, Johnny Cash and Metallica, to indicate strength.

Fire trucks parked outside hailed from Long Beach, Los Angeles and Riverside. Nearby were large white mobile sleepers that could fit 45 weary firefighters. Some preferred to pitch a tent.

"It's tiring work, no doubt about it. But most of these guys are in really great shape, and they thrive in this environment," said Hugo Patino, Modesto Fire Department battalion chief.

Mike Burt with the Glendale Fire Department in Los Angeles County said his crew received a call to help last Thursday morning and was in Lakeport that afternoon.

"I'd like to put my feet in an ice chest basically, but I won't do that," he said, laughing. "That would feel pretty good."