

1 dead, hundreds homeless as fires ravage Calif.

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By Associated Press

MIDDLETOWN – Authorities say a wildfire that overtook several Northern California towns has killed at least one person and destroyed more than 400 homes and businesses.

A California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection spokeswoman released the tally Sunday evening as firefighters continue to battle the out-of-control blaze north of San Francisco in Lake County.

Lynn Valentine said officials confirmed one fatality, though she had no immediate information on the deceased.

She said the fire has destroyed 400 homes, two apartment complexes and 10 businesses. Most of the destruction occurred in the communities of Middletown and Hidden Valley Lake, as well as homes along a shuttered highway.

The fire has burned at least 50,000 acres. At this point, it's zero percent contained. It's being called California's worst wildfire of the season.

The devastation from the latest in a string of wildfires in Lake County comes after a separate wildfire to the southeast destroyed at least 81 homes.

Cal Fire spokesman Daniel Berlant said the fire started near Cobb, in unincorporated Lake County, and hit the communities of Middletown and Hidden Valley Lake particularly hard.

The fire initially pushed toward the southeast, but began moving north Sunday, according to Berlant.

Residents fled from Middletown, dodging smoldering telephone poles, downed power lines and fallen trees as they drove through billowing smoke.

Whole blocks of houses were burned in parts of the town of more than 1,000 residents that lies about 20 miles north of the famed Napa Valley. On the west side of town, house after house was burned to their foundations, with only charred appliances and twisted metal garage doors still recognizable.

Early Sunday evening, the fire spread into the Geysers area near the Lake County border and the Big Sulphur Creek drainage.

Gov. Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency in Lake and Napa counties Sunday because of the extensive damaged caused by the Valley Fire, according state officials.

The governor has also called up the California National Guard as part of the state of emergency and requested money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, state officials said.

Napa County opened its emergency operations center Sunday and some people who had to flee the fire are staying at the Napa County Fairgrounds in Calistoga, county officials said.

Advisory evacuations were ordered by CalFire for Pine Flat Road at addresses 5000 and above as well as Geysers Road both out of Healdsburg (addresses 6000 and above) and Geyserville (addresses 9400 and above).

Advisory evacuations notify residents that existing conditions dictate that a mandatory evacuation order may be given in the near future, but that the threat to lives is not yet imminent.

Firefighters on Sunday afternoon could be seen driving around flaming utility poles to put out spot fires. Homeowner Justin

Galvin, 33, himself a firefighter, stood alone at his house, poking its shin-high, smoking ruins with a piece of scrap metal.

“This is my home. Or it was,” said Galvin, who spent all night fighting another fire in Amador County.

Wind gusts that reached up to 30 mph sent embers raining down on homes and made it hard for firefighters to stop the Lake County blaze from advancing, CalFire spokesman Daniel Berlant said. Four firefighters were injured Saturday while battling the flames.

“This has been a tragic reminder to us of the dangers this drought is posing,” he said.

At least 10,000 residents in the area have been evacuated. “My dad worked hard for us to have that house and it’s sad that all those memories are gone ... we lost everything,” said evacuee Roberto Vazquez.

Napa County officials have opened an emergency operations center to help with the response to the Valley Fire, county officials said.

Money from FEMA will come through a Fire Management Assistance Grant to reimburse the state for up to 75 percent of eligible expenses used to extinguish the fire, FEMA officials said.

FEMA officials have also sent two response division liaison officers to the California Office of Emergency Services in Sacramento, according to the agency. The liaisons will stay abreast of the fire and report to FEMA leaders, FEMA spokesman John Hamill said Sunday.

Hamill said the fire could prompt a greater federal response, if the fire exhausts state resources. “There could be a capacity issue,” he said.

To his knowledge Brown has not asked for a presidential

disaster declaration, which would give California more federal resources.

Cal OES spokesman Brad Alexander said another request for federal help is always on the table. He said right now state officials are focusing on protecting lives and property.

He said state officials are in touch regularly with federal officials in Washington, D.C.

Mandatory evacuations are in effect in parts of Napa County, including Summit Lake Drive, Ink Grade Road, and Howell Mountain Road North beginning at White Cottage Road to Pope Valley, county officials said.

American Red Cross officials have set up a shelter at the Calistoga Fairgrounds and the officials are asking people to make donations to fire survivors at redcross.org.

County officials said people are scamming survivors through social media by asking evacuees' for their addresses. The scammers say they are part of a news crew covering the fire and will check on the evacuee's home, county officials said.

Burglars use the ploy to steal things, according to county officials.

Sheriff's deputies are patrolling evacuated areas and advise evacuees to avoid giving out their addresses online.

It will be about two days before evacuees can return home, according to CHP officials.

Whole blocks of houses burned in parts of Middletown, where firefighters were driving around guardrails and flaming utility poles to put out spot fires Sunday afternoon.

On the west side of town, house after house was burned to their foundations, with only charred appliances and twisted metal garage doors still recognizable.

George Escalona told the Associated Press that parts of his town, including his home, have burned to the ground.

In some areas of town "there is nothing but burned houses, burned cars," Escalona said, adding that he has nothing left but the clothes he was wearing.

The 60-square-mile fire erupted Saturday afternoon and rapidly chewed through brush and trees parched from several years of drought, Cal Fire said. Entire towns as well as residents along a 35-mile stretch of highway were evacuated.

The four firefighters who were injured were all members of a helicopter crew. They were airlifted to a hospital burn unit, where they were being treated for second-degree burns and were listed in stable condition, Berlant said.

Brown had already declared a state of emergency for the separate 101-square-mile wildfire about 70 miles southeast of Sacramento that has destroyed at least 81 homes and 51 outbuildings and turned the grassy, tree-studded Sierra Nevada foothills an eerie white. Fire officials had earlier counted 86 homes destroyed, but issued the new figure Sunday morning.

Crews by Sunday morning had increased containment on that blaze to 20 percent.

The fire, which broke out on Wednesday was threatening about 6,400 more buildings.

"I lost my business – it's all burned up – my shop, my house, 28 years of living," said Joe Thomas, who lives near the community of Mountain Ranch. "I got to start all over. It's depressing."

Thomas, who runs a tractor dealership and repair business, said he and his wife grabbed papers, his work computer, photos and their four dogs. But they left a goat, five ducks, six rabbits and more than 30 chickens behind.

"I turned the pens open and turned them lose. I just couldn't gather them up," he said. "All we want to do is go home. It's miserable."as been declared by Gov. Jerry Brown for the areas of all of these fires.