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ERSKINE FIRE

IN FLAMES

Fast-moving blaze kills 2 near Lake Isabella



CASEY CHRISTIE / THE CALIFORNIAN

Firefighters light backfires near Lake Isabella about 11 p.m. Thursday. As of Friday, the Erskine Fire had charred roughly 30,000 acres and razed scores of homes.

INSIDE

BY HAROLD PIERCE, JOHN COX AND STEVEN MAYER • THE BAKERSFIELD CALIFORNIAN

Two pages of photographs from photojournalists Casey Christie and Henry A. Barrios. **A4 & A7**

A grant award ensures Kern County will get federal and state help covering Erskine's firefighting bill. **A5**

The fast-moving blaze caught area residents by surprise. **A5**

In a column, Californian photographer Casey Christie, a resident of Bodfish, writes that he has never seen anything like the Erskine Fire. **A5**

Animal owners forced to release pets and livestock as the blaze roared down on homes and ranches. **A8**

LAKE ISABELLA — A fast-moving brush fire fueled by gusty winds and high temperatures swept through Lake Isabella on Friday, claiming at least two lives, charring roughly 30,000 acres and leveling scores of homes, fire officials said.

Kern County Fire Department officials confirmed discovering two bodies in the blaze Friday, a man and a woman who apparently attempted to flee their home before they were overtaken by smoke. Officials would not identify from which neighborhood those two were found

pending notification of kin.

And there could be more casualties, Kern County Sheriff Donny Youngblood said during a news conference Friday in Lake Isabella. Cadaver dogs will be used as deputies go through the rubble to see if anyone else was killed.

"Certainly I'm fearful. This fire moves so rapidly and we have evidence two people tried to escape the fire and we have fears, and I hope that they're wrong. I hope we go into the rubble and it's just fire damage," Youngblood said.

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

More than 800 firefighters from multiple agencies have struggled to keep pace with the Erskine Fire, which has been burning since about 4 p.m. Thursday. It grew more than 14,000 acres between Thursday night and Friday morning, and fire officials estimated it at about 30,000 acres as of Friday evening. Roughly 5 percent has been contained, prompting Gov. Jerry Brown Friday to declare a state of emergency.

"Anne and I extend our heartfelt sympathies to everyone impacted by this destructive blaze," Brown said in a statement. "We join all Californians in expressing our

Please see WILDFIRE / A3

ONLINE

Video packages by Charmaine Cleveland, Harold Pierce and John Farrand.

Photo galleries by Casey Christie and Henry A. Barrios.

Live updates on The Bakersfield Californian's Facebook Page.

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Download TBC Mobile from the App Store to follow live updates on your iOS or Android devices.

Visit Bakersfield.com for around-the-clock updates today.

See pictures of the Erskine Fire on Instagram by following @bakersfieldcali.



RALPH STANLEY | 1927-2016
Bluegrass legend helped launch country stars' careers **PAGE A9**

Why exclude unemployment rate from job creation debate? **SOUND OFF | A10**

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Erskine Fire



CASEY CHRISTIE / THE CALIFORNIAN

The devastated homes in Squirrel Valley were still smoldering Friday morning and several of the road closures remained in effect.

WILDFIRE

CONTINUED FROM A1

gratitude to the courageous firefighters, emergency personnel and volunteers working tirelessly throughout Kern County to help residents and extinguish this fire.”

The fire has devastated about 80 homes, threatened thousands more, forced the Kern Valley Hospital to evacuate and left hundreds stranded in emergency shelters across the valley.

That hospital evacuated patients not because it was threatened by fire, but because it lost electricity, possibly after flames knocked down a power line, Kern County Fire Department Capt. Tyler Townsend said.

Nearly every community south of Isabella Lake had been recommended for evacuation by Friday evening, including the South Lake and Squirrel Valley neighborhoods which were hit particularly hard by the flames. Other recommended evacuations include Bella Vista, South Fork, Weldon, Onyx, Lakeland Estates, Mountain Mesa, South Lake, Squirrel Valley and Yankee Canyon.

‘Most destructive fire’

Cal Fire spokesman Daniel Berlant called the blaze “the most destructive fire that we’ve seen this year” in California, a conflagration fueled by grass that grew particularly thick amid recent El Niño wet weather conditions.

“The rain is a blessing and a curse,” he said, adding “we’ll take every drop we can get.”

County and state officials also pointed to triple-digit weather, single-digit humidity and winds up to 20 mph as contributing to the Erskine Fire’s volatility. They further noted that years of drought conditions have killed or weakened trees to the point they burn easily.

“All those things combined is just ... creating extreme fire behavior,” KCFD Battalion Chief Derek Tisinger told The Californian.

But the area is accustomed to regular wildfires, Youngblood said.

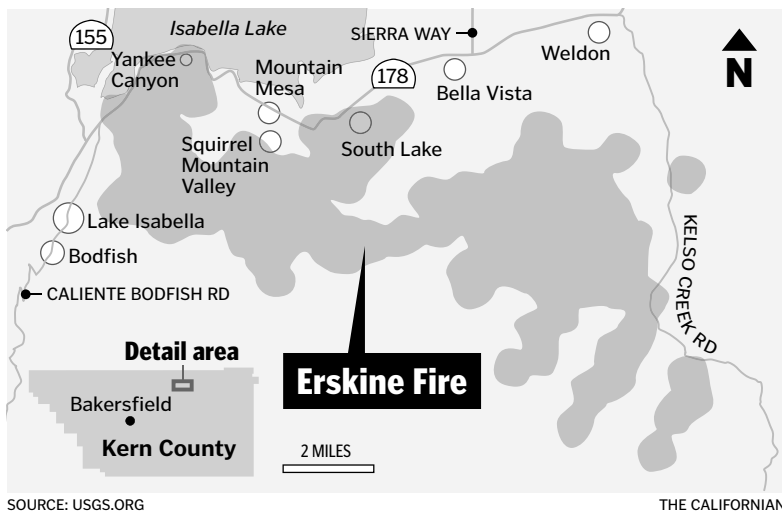
“This particular mountain has caught fire every year here,” Youngblood said. “It gets to the top and it stops and it’s spectacular.”

But this year, gusty winds carried flames over the ridgeline, Youngblood said.

The Erskine Fire may go down in history as one of the most destructive wildland fires Kern County has ever seen.

Human, financial toll

And many of its victims are the poorest of the poor in the Kern River Valley, a remote and rural region whose social safety net may be tested as never before as hundreds of residents now face the loss



SOURCE: USGS.ORG

THE CALIFORNIAN

30,000

Number of acres burned as of Friday evening, an increase of 30 percent from Thursday

5%

Containment

100+

Number of homes burned

1,500

Homes threatened, across several communities on the south side of Lake Isabella

2

Number of confirmed deaths

3

Number of injured firefighters, suffering minor to moderate injuries

Source: State and local fire officials speaking at a 6 p.m. Friday update to news media

of their homes.

While the fate of many who have lost their homes is still unclear, some help in the firefighting effort is already on its way from the federal government, state Sen. Jean Fuller said Friday evening. Fuller, along with 1st District Kern County Supervisor Mick Gleason, visited the American Red Cross Disaster

Relief Shelter set up at the elementary school in Kernville.

Seventy-five percent of the firefighting cost will be paid for by the federal government, Fuller said. It’s already been approved. And other federal and state assistance may also be forthcoming.

Private assistance from individuals, organizations and businesses has already been arriving in the form of food, water and much-needed ice.

Fuller said fire officials have emphasized that this fire has been especially difficult to track and its behavior has been hard to predict.

Maybe an investigation is appropriate, she said, not to point fingers, but to learn from this experience.

Was the response time in line with expectations? she asked. Was the coordination between agencies well executed?

“This fire is different from all the others we’ve lived through in the past,” Fuller said.

Gleason pointed out that even firefighters lost homes to this difficult fire.

“We have people who have emotional ties to this fire,” he said of local firefighters.

The response

The destruction of cellphone towers, electricity failing in burn areas, wind behaving in atypical ways, and that some local firefighters were called upon to battle fires in other areas — and that California has experienced a historic multi-year drought — created something of a perfect firestorm.

“I don’t know that anybody could have done a better job,” Fuller said.

But evacuees bedding down in cots at emergency shelters have been decrying the notice they were given to evacuate, citing a lack of preparation before having to flee their homes, if any at all.

Youngblood acknowledged that the fire’s rapid growth created challenges.

Community members are describing it as disorganization at best. There were emergency calls

made to landlines warning of voluntary evacuations around 4:45 p.m.; however, a few moments later flames engulfed homes in the area, one evacuee said. Few residents said they received those calls because they no longer maintain landlines.

Others said the only warnings they received to flee their homes were emergency vehicles speeding through the area with sirens blaring.

Nathan and Teresa Magee, who are both on disability, are among those in the cots, and they know that their home has been charred to the ground, or as Teresa put it, “all that’s left is a concrete slab.”

They live in South Lake, a neighborhood that has been hit perhaps hardest by the Erskine Fire, which tore through more than 8,000 acres by Thursday evening, leaving a wake of homes in its path.

The Magees can count their apartment at Goat Ranch Road among them.

It didn’t click at first, Teresa said. She woke up from bed and smelled something funny. Nate turned and looked at her — “What’s that smell?”

“Some damn fool is burning wood in their chimney,” she said, asking herself who would do that during a near triple-digit heat wave that’s been pummeling Kern County for days. Then she looked outside.

Three police cars whizzed by with lights and sirens blaring. She took that as the signal for an evacuation — or as her neighbor yelled to her, “get the hell out now.”

But she thought it would be just temporary. She never imagined she would lose her home. Otherwise, she’d have grabbed a lot more. Like the pictures of her mother hanging in the hallway — she died a couple of years ago.

“I was so confused at the time, I couldn’t think to grab anything,” said Nathan, who at the time kept walking out of the apartment to the street, checking to see whether the fire would come over the hill.

“Then it came over the hill,” Teresa said.

But Teresa never got a phone call warning her to evacuate.

“I expected a big formal door-to-door, but nothing like that happened,” said Magan Weid, a South Lake resident who lost her home. Instead, she got a phone call on her landline recommending an evacuation, and this ominous message: “This will probably be the last message you receive.”

‘We did the best we could’

Youngblood defended the department during a news conference Friday, and said that 20 to 40 patrol officers knocked door to door warning of evacuations. He couldn’t point to which communi-

ties were first informed.

“We did the best we could. This is a unique situation. The fire occurred so rapidly and spread so quickly. Every time we have one of these we learn how to do it better but every one is different. The officers did the evacuations as quickly as we possibly could,” Youngblood said.

Weid’s first thought was how she would manage getting her ailing 86-year-old father to safety by herself as the fire neared.

“It was fast. The flames came right across the street and were coming right toward our house,” Weid said. “We were kind of running for our lives.”

Weid said she saw a cellphone video of her neighborhood online Friday afternoon. She could recognize her street, but all the homes were leveled. She saw concrete walkways leading nowhere and her father’s weathervane, which survived the blaze, but not her family’s home. They had lived there since before the 1970s, when another fire ripped through the area.

That one didn’t come close to their house, she said.

“Maybe I had too much stuff,” Weid said, showing a sense of optimism that she later said she was faking. It’s all she could do not to cry.

She was one of the hundreds who sat waiting at the Red Cross shelter in Kernville, coasting in on fumes. The blaze became so hot that it evaporated most of the fuel in evacuees’ gas tanks.

Few realized that could happen. Just like some neighbors thought they could save themselves by jumping into a pool, said 22-year-old South Lake resident Brennon Anderson, who yelled at them to evacuate.

“They were going to boil,” he said.

Grappling with death

Despite reports that two individuals died in the fire, Anderson said that number is likely much higher.

“We were almost dead,” yelled Anderson as he stood outside the shelter looking disheveled. And he saw his elderly neighbors from down the street die, too, he said.

They were packing up their car as the flames approached. It sounded like a tornado mixed with a screaming whistle, almost supernatural, Anderson said.

The couple headed back into their home for more of their belongings, then Anderson saw the blaze jump to the elderly couple’s home and swallow it in fire. It charred fast. That was the last time he saw them. Their car was still in the driveway, Anderson said.

“We didn’t even know until it was too late,” Anderson said, criticizing a lack of warning for evacuations. “Not one firefighter came to help us escape from the fire.”