

California: Deadly fire shuts down key route to Yosemite National Park

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Crews battle the Ferguson Fire along steep terrain behind the Redbud Lodge along Highway 140 near El Portal in Mariposa County, California. (AP/file)

California: A wildfire that killed a California firefighter grew quickly and forced the closure of a key route into Yosemite National Park as crews contended with sweltering conditions Sunday, authorities said.

The so-called Ferguson Fire that broke out Friday scorched nearly 7 square miles (18 square kilometers) of dry brush along steep, remote hillsides on the park's western edge. It was burning largely out of control, and officials shut off electricity to many areas, including Yosemite Valley, as a safety precaution.

Guests were ordered to leave Yosemite Cedar Lodge on Saturday as flames crept up slopes and the air became thick with smoke. "You can't see anything, it's so smoky outside. It's crazy," said front desk clerk Spencer Arebalo, one of a handful of employees who stayed behind at the popular hotel inside the park.

He said it was surreal to see the property empty at the height of tourist season. "We're counting on being closed at least one more day," Arebalo said.

Evacuations also were ordered in rural communities just outside the park, and people in nearby lodges and motels were told to be ready to leave if flames approach. A stretch of State Route 140 into Yosemite was closed, and motorists were urged to find alternate routes.

Temperatures spiking to 95 degrees (35 Celsius) and inaccessible terrain were making it difficult for crews to slow the flames, U.S. Forest Service fire Capt. Mike Seymour said.

Heavy fire equipment operator Braden Varney, 36, died early Saturday on the fire line, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said. Varney was driving a bulldozer to create a gap in vegetation to keep the flames from extending into a nearby community, according to Cal Fire Fire Chief Nancy Koerperich.

Varney's body likely won't be retrieved until Monday at the earliest because it's in a "precarious location" and conditions were too dangerous over the weekend, Cal Fire Deputy Chief Scott McLean said.

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A blaze near the California-Oregon border that killed a 72-year-old resident and injured three firefighters was almost entirely contained after burning more than 60 square miles (155 square kilometers) of dry brush.

Crews got full control over a stubborn fire that scorched 142 square miles (368 square kilometers) of brush and destroyed 20 structures in Yolo and Napa counties. Investigators said an electric livestock fence that was improperly installed sparked the flames.

In the fire near Yosemite, investigators were trying to find out more details about Varney's death Saturday, but they believe he was working his way out of the fire area when he was killed, Koerperich said.

"This certainly is going to be devastating to his family and those of us who call him family here with Cal Fire," she said.

Varney had worked for Cal Fire for 10 years. His father also worked as a Cal Fire heavy equipment operator. He is survived by his wife, Jessica; daughter Malhea, 5; and son Nolan, 3.

Gov. Jerry Brown ordered flags at the California Capitol to be flown at half-staff to honor "a man who dedicated his life to protecting his fellow Californians."

- AP