

Fatal wildfire rips through California towns; residents flee

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Firefighters monitor the Thomas fire as it burns through Los Padres National Forest in California. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

An explosive wildfire tore through two small Northern California communities Thursday before reaching the city of Redding, killing a bulldozer operator on the fire lines, burning three firefighters, destroying dozens of homes and forcing thousands of terrified residents to flee.

Flames swept through the communities of Shasta and Keswick before jumping the Sacramento River and reaching Redding, a city of about 92,000 people and the largest in the region.

The so-called Carr Fire is "taking down everything in its path," said Scott McLean, a CalFire spokesman for the crews battling the blaze. "It's just a wall of flames," he said.

Residents of western Redding who hadn't been under evacuation orders were caught off guard and had to flee with little notice, causing miles-long traffic jams as flames turned the skies orange. "When it hit, people were really scrambling," McLean said. "There was not much of a warning."

Many firefighters turned their focus from the flames to getting people out alive. "Really we're in a life-saving mode right now in Redding," said Jonathan Cox, battalion chief with Cal Fire. "We're not fighting a fire. We're trying to move people out of the path of it because it is now deadly and it is now moving at speeds and in ways we have not seen before in this area."

Some residents drove to hotels or the homes of family members in safer parts of California, while other evacuees poured into a shelter just outside of town.

A reporter with KRCR-TV choked up as she reported live updates about the fire before the station had to go off the air later. Two news anchors told viewers that the building was being evacuated and urged residents to "be safe."

Journalists at the Record Searchlight newspaper tweeted about continuing to report on the fire without electricity in their newsroom, and a reporter at KHSL-TV wrote on Twitter that the station's Redding reporters were "running home to gather their things."

Mike Mangas, a spokesman at Mercy Medical Center, said the hospital was evacuating five babies in its neonatal intensive care unit, which cares for premature newborns, and taking them to medical facilities outside of the area.

He said the hospital was preparing high-risk patients to be evacuated but there were no immediate plans to do so. He said several burn patients were admitted to the emergency room but that most were being treated and released.

Late Thursday, crews found the body of a bulldozer operator who was hired privately to clear vegetation in the blaze's path, McLean said.

The fire burned over the operator and his equipment, making the man the second bulldozer operator killed in a California blaze in less than two weeks.

Three firefighters and an unknown number of civilians had burns, but the extent of their injuries wasn't immediately known, McLean said. "It's just chaotic. It's wild," he said. "There's a lot of fire, a lot of structures burning."

Firefighters tried in vain to build containment around the blaze Thursday but flames kept jumping their lines, he said. "It's just a heck of a fight," he said. "They're doing what they can do and they get pushed out in a lot of cases. We're fighting the fight right now."

He said the fire behavior was so erratic, there were tornadoes within the fire "tossing around equipment, blowing windows out of Cal Fire pickup trucks."

The 45-square-mile (115-square-kilometer) fire that began Monday tripled in size overnight Thursday amid scorching temperatures, low humidity and windy conditions. It was sparked by a mechanical issue involving a vehicle, Cal Fire said.

Brett Gouvea, incident commander of the crews battling the fire, urged residents to pay close attention to the blaze. "This fire is extremely dangerous and moving with no regard for what's in its path," he said.

Earlier in the day with flames exploding around Whiskeytown Lake, an effort to save boats at a marina by untying them from moorings and pushing them to safety, wasn't swift enough to spare them all.

Dozens of charred, twisted and melted boats were among the losses at Oak Bottom Marina. "The boat docks down there all the way out in the water _ 30 to 40 boats caught fire when the fire laid down on top of them last night and burned those up," said fire Chief Mike Hebrard of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Wildfires throughout the state have burned through tinder-dry brush and forest, forced thousands to evacuate homes and caused campers to pack up their tents at the height of summer. Gov. Jerry Brown declared states of emergency for the three largest fires, which will authorize the state to rally resources to local governments.

The wildfires have dispatched firefighters to all corners of the state amid an oppressive heat wave.

A huge forest fire continued to grow outside Yosemite National Park. That blaze killed 36-year-old Braden Varney, a heavy equipment operator for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection whose bulldozer rolled over into a ravine July 14.

Hundreds of miles to the south, the Cranston Fire grew to 7.5 square miles (19 square kilometers) and about 3,000 residents remained under evacuation orders in Idyllwild and several neighboring communities. That fire, which destroyed five homes, is believed to have been sparked by arson.

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