



NEWS



News Headlines 08/03/2023

- York Fire has destroyed biodiverse properties owned by Mojave Desert Land Trust
- 'Heart-wrenching': California's York Fire hurting habitats, hearts and lungs

York Fire has destroyed biodiverse properties owned by Mojave Desert Land Trust

By Rene Ray De La Cruz, Victorville Daily Press
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A car passes rising flames from the York Fire on Ivabpah Rd., Sunday, July 30, 2023, in the Mojave National Preserve, Calif.

The Mojave Desert Land Trust closely monitors the York Fire and the nonprofit's nearly 560 acres within the burn zone in the Mojave National Preserve.

Once the area has been declared safe, desert trust officials will assess the York Fire's impact and damage to its properties and habitats, rich in biodiversity and dense Joshua tree woodlands.

Firefighters battled "fire whirls" to partially contain the massive wildfire this week after the blaze ignited in a California wildland preserve and spread east into Nevada.

A fire whirl — sometimes called a fire tornado — is a "spinning column of fire" that forms when intense heat and turbulent winds combine, according to National Park Service officials.

The vortexes, spotted frequently on the north end of the York Fire, can be anywhere from a few feet tall to several hundred feet high, with varying rotational speeds.

Approaching monsoonal weather patterns have brought increased moisture and winds, which can cause the fire to spread more rapidly and unpredictably, firefighters said.

The York Fire on Wednesday morning was mapped at roughly 80,437 acres and 125 square miles, with 23% containment, making it the largest wildfire of the season in California.

Flames have destroyed countless desert scrub, juniper, and Joshua trees.

Firefighters experienced heavy rain on Tuesday afternoon, which lessened the fire's erratic behavior.

firefighters continued to build and reinforce containment lines overnight while mopping up and looking for hot spots along the fire's borders.

There are no evacuations. Park closure includes Ivanpah Road between Morning Star Mine Road and Cedar Canyon Road.

Hart Mine Road is closed due to hazardous wildfire conditions and fire suppression operations.

Mojave National Preserve is also under extreme fire restrictions. Fire agencies are asking the public to stay clear of the area.

Land trust properties

Lands were acquired in the preserve by the trust due to their significant habitat value, and with the intention of conveyance to the National Park Service at a future date, the nonprofit said.

One of Mojave Desert Land Trust's properties within the burn zone is in the Gotto Hills, at the heart of the preserve's Lanfair Valley. The group said the parcel sweeps across 160 acres, reaching an elevation of 4,427 feet.

Another 17-acre parcel rises above a wash, its hillsides dotted with Joshua, juniper, and pinyon trees. The natural ore deposits once made it attractive for mining.

A biodiversity paradise

Wind-driven flames, 20 feet high in some spots, charred tens of thousands of acres of black brush scrub, pinyon-juniper woodlands, and the famous Joshua trees in the New York Mountains in San Bernardino County, the Associated Press reported.

Ileene Anderson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity, said it could take 200 to 300 years for the pinyon-juniper woodlands to become "a functional community again." At the same time, the black brush scrub and Joshua trees are unlikely to regrow after this catastrophic blaze, which erupted without human intervention.

"We are heartbroken to learn of the devastating York Fire. The blaze has impacted some of the greatest ecological treasures of this National Park Service unit," said MDLT Joint Executive Director Cody Hanford. "It has reached one of the largest and densest forests of eastern Joshua trees in Mojave National Preserve, as well as the remote Caruthers Canyon, a spectacular example of rich Mojave Desert biodiversity."

Hanford added that the burned portion of the preserve is a world-class location for a desert wilderness experience appreciated by many.

"This fire is also tragic considering certain burn areas likely destroyed new plant growth that had begun establishing in the wake of the 2005 Hackberry Fire," he said. "The chances of survival of those new plants are almost doomed."

On behalf of the MDLT, Handford expressed his gratitude to the first responders and the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, **San Bernardino County Fire** Protection District, and Clark County Fire.

Background

The trust has protected approximately 120,000 acres across the California desert and 27,990 acres within the preserve since 2006.

The MDLT currently owns and manages 4,015 acres within the preserve, they said.

Much of the land acquired by the Mojave Desert Land Trust has been conveyed to its federal partners. This work helps piece together public lands and supports the optimal management of natural resources. The trust has communicated more tracts of land to the National Parks system than any nonprofit since 2006.

<https://www.vvdailynews.com/story/news/fire/2023/08/02/york-fire-has-destroyed-mojave-desert-land-trust-biodiverse-properties/70511324007/>

'Heart-wrenching': California's York Fire hurting habitats, hearts and lungs

By Elysee Barakett, NBC Los Angeles

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Crane Valley Hotshots set a backfire as the York Fire burns in the Mojave National Preserve on July 30, 2023. The York Fire has crossed the state line from California into Nevada. Photo by DAVID SWANSON/AFP via Getty Images.

The York Fire has burned more than 80,000 acres, roughly one-fourth the size of the city of Los Angeles. It's currently the largest wildfire in the state this year.

The fire began on private land in the Mojave National Preserve on July 28, according to a press release from the National Parks Service. The flames have since spread over across the New York Mountains, San Bernardino County and Clark Country, Nevada.

So far this year, "30,466 wildfires have burned 1,174,562 acres in the United States," according to a Tweet from the National Interagency Fire Center.

The York Fire has consumed Pinyon pines, Utah junipers and Joshua trees and displaced all kinds of animals in its wake. Nearly 400 people are working to contain and suppress the fire and prevent it from destroying more land, but the blaze's thick smoke has challenged their efforts.

"With visibility up to a mile or less in some areas it has a significant implication and causes hazardous conditions, hindering firefighting operations as it affects aerial support, ground crews' movement, and communications between firefighting units," the NPS press release stated.

Marc Peebles is the public information officer at California Incident Management Team 13 and a retired battalion chief for the **San Bernardino County Fire** Department.

Peebles said that the state's "robust winter" has promoted the growth of vegetation. In the summer, those plants dry out and carry the fire farther. California's monsoon season runs from mid-July to September, and Peebles added that strong monsoonal winds have also allowed the fire to spread.

He highlighted that the firefighters are “doing a really good job and they're making progress.” They have been able to contain 30% of the fire, by creating a barrier to stop it from spreading.

The National Parks Service is conducting an investigation into what caused the blaze, Peebles said.

The animals and the trees

Neal Darby, a wildlife biologist at the preserve, said that seeing the loss of the wetlands is “heart-wrenching,” but he highlighted that “nature is very resilient.”

The biggest concern following the fire is the dead and burned plants. “Until things can start regrowing, there's nothing for these animals to eat,” he said.

Animals that once benefited from the trees' cool shade will have to find relief from the sun elsewhere, Darby said, while other animals that prefer the open space will move onto the burned land. For example, bighorn sheep dislike wooded areas, so they will likely go into areas without trees, he added.

Darby said that water sources have been impacted by the fires as well, so animals, like the mule deer, will move elsewhere in search of water. Since mountain lions hunt deer, they will follow where their prey goes.

Though Darby said it will be “a slow process” for the reserve to regrow, he is “optimistic.”

He explained that it will take a few years for grasses to return, four to five years for a significant amount of shrubs to appear and 20 to 30 years for the woodland to grow.

This growth depends on certain climatic conditions, such as droughts, which scientists say have become more frequent with climate change, according to Darby. Darby fears that the precipitation patterns in the area will continue to shift. Right now, there is less rain overall, but when it rains, there is a downpour, he said.

Darby has seen the vegetation grow at higher elevations to adjust to these changes, and he said that the animals that depend on those plants follow them to higher grounds.

“I do see a lot more tortoises in the foothills of the mountains than we typically used to see,” he said.

Dealing with smoke

Nevada’s Department of Conservation and Natural Resources wrote in a blog post that smoke pollution has increased from the “record-breaking temperatures and extreme drought fueling catastrophic wildfires across the west.”

Wildfires often worsen the air quality for short periods of time, as they bring certain chemicals into the atmosphere. Poor air quality can create health issues for all people, by irritating the eyes, nose, throat and lungs.

Nevada’s DCNR recommends that people pay close attention to local air quality, avoid the outdoors if it looks hazy and reduce smoke in homes and vehicles by closing windows and using AC in recirculate mode.

Peebles said people should refer to Cal Fire’s Ready, Set, Go! Wildfire Action Plan, which teaches people about how to protect themselves and their family members from wildfires.

One ranger reflects on climate change after seeing the damage of wildfires

“My heart dropped,” Sierra Willoughby, a supervisory park ranger at Mojave National Preserve, recalled. They were on a camping trip with friends when their coworkers called to tell them about the York Fire.

“Seeing big fires happen all the time makes me feel like we're living in a new time and none of this beautiful habitat I see around me is safe,” they said, referring to the 2020 Dome Fire and the 2021 Caldor Fire.

They said they have lived in California since the 1970s and have seen the ways the climate has changed, such as more severe droughts, stronger rains and larger fires.

They hope that when people see the impact of the York Fire and other recent fires, it will be “a wake-up call for us to make real changes, to bring wild places more into our decision-making as a society and how we live our lives.”

“Things do bounce back, but in my lifetime, I'm never going to see that dense Joshua tree forest that I saw when I visited the preserve 10 years ago,” Willoughby said.

<https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/california-wildfires/york-fire-habitat-joshua-trees-mojave-preserve-wildfire/3198074/>