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Watch CA Firefighters Battle Vacant Building Blaze

Staff Writer, FIREHOUSE

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Raw video shows San Bernardino County firefighters responding to a blaze that erupted at an abandoned dentistry building, sending flames through the roof.

California firefighters tackled a commercial blaze that broke out at a vacant dentistry building early Thursday.

Crews responded shortly after 1:41 a.m. to multiple calls of a fire in San Bernardino, the **San Bernardino County Fire** Department said in an online update.

Firefighters started with an offensive attack while a search for occupants was performed. But they had to switch to a defensive posture before finishing the search.

The blaze was extinguished after 45 minutes, and no injuries were reported. The cause of the fire is under investigation.

<https://www.firehouse.com/operations-training/video/21155987/watch-ca-firefighters-battle-vacant-building-blaze>

Largest California wildfire threatens marijuana-growing area

Staff Writer, KY3 THE PLACE TO BE

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Jesse Vasquez, of the **San Bernardino County Fire** Department, hoses down hot spots from the Bobcat Fire on Saturday, Sept. 19, 2020, in Valyermo, Calif.(AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) - Firefighters and officials at California's largest utility company braced for hot, dry and windy weather in northern and central areas of the state this weekend that may fan the flames of several major wildfires or ignite new ones.

Pacific Gas & Electric warned Friday it may cut power from Sunday morning to Monday, potentially affecting 97,000 customers in 16 counties, during which forecasters said a ridge of high pressure will raise temperatures and generate gusts flowing from the interior to the coast.

PG&E initially warned that approximately 21,000 customers in three counties would lose power beginning Saturday evening but expanded the potential shutoff when the forecast changed.

The utility is tracking the weather to determine if it would be necessary to shut off power to areas where gusts could damage the company's equipment or hurl debris into lines that can ignite flammable vegetation.

When heavy winds were predicted earlier this month, PG&E cut power to about 167,000 homes and businesses in central and Northern California in a more targeted approach after being criticized last year for acting too broadly when it blacked out 2 million customers to prevent fires.

PG&E equipment has sparked past large wildfires, including the 2018 fire that destroyed much of the Sierra foothills town of Paradise and killed 85 people.

Firefighters battling the state's largest wildfire braced for the change in weather by constructing fuel breaks on Friday to keep the flames from reaching a marijuana-growing enclave where authorities said many of the locals have refused to evacuate and abandon their maturing crops.

The wildfire called the August Complex is nearing the small communities of Post Mountain and Trinity Pines, about 200 miles (322 kilometers) northwest of Sacramento, the Los Angeles Times reported.

Law enforcement officers went door to door warning of the encroaching fire danger but could not force residents to evacuate, Trinity County Sheriff's Department Deputy Nate Trujillo said.

"It's mainly growers," Trujillo said. "And a lot of them, they don't want to leave because that is their livelihood."

As many as 1,000 people remained in Post Mountain and Trinity Pines, authorities and local residents estimated Thursday.

Numerous studies in recent years have linked bigger U.S. wildfires to global warming from the burning of coal, oil and gas, especially because climate change has made California much drier. A drier California means plants are more flammable.

The U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region announced Friday that it is extending the closure of all nine national forests in California due to concerns including fire conditions and critical limitations on firefighting resources.

The threatened marijuana growing area is in the Emerald Triangle, a three-county corner of Northern California that by some estimates is the nation's largest cannabis-producing region.

People familiar with Trinity Pines said the community has up to 40 legal farms, with more than 10 times that number in hidden, illegal growing areas.

Growers are wary of leaving the plants vulnerable to flames or thieves. Each farm has crops worth half a million dollars or more and many are within days or weeks of harvest.

One estimate put the value of the area's legal marijuana crop at about \$20 million.

"There (are) millions of dollars, millions and millions of dollars of marijuana out there," Trujillo said. "Some of those plants are 16 feet (5 meters) tall, and they are all in the budding stages of growth right now."

Gunfire in the region is common. A recent night brought what locals dubbed the "roll call" of cannabis cultivators shooting rounds from pistols and automatic weapons as warnings to outsiders, said Post Mountain volunteer Fire Chief Astrid Dobo, who also manages legal cannabis farms.

Hundreds of migrant workers typically pour into the area this time of year to help trim and harvest the plants, but it's uncertain whether that population dwindled due to the coronavirus pandemic, said Julia Rubinic, a member of the Trinity County Agriculture Alliance, which represents licensed cannabis growers.

Mike McMillan, spokesman for the federal incident command team managing the northern section of the August Complex, said fire officials plan to deliver a clear message that "we are not going to die to save people. That is not our job."

"We are going to knock door to door and tell them once again," McMillan said. "However, if they choose to stay and if the fire situation becomes, as we say, very dynamic and very dangerous ... we are not going to risk our lives."

A firefighter was killed and another was injured on Aug. 31 while working on the fire. Diana Jones, a volunteer firefighter from Texas, was among 26 people who have died since more than two dozen major wildfires broke out across the state last month.

A memorial service was held Friday for a veteran firefighter, Charles Morton, 39, a squad boss with the Big Bear Interagency Hotshot Crew who died Sept. 17 while battling the El Dorado Fire in the San Bernardino National Forest east of Los Angeles.

“I know that Charlie was a very skilled, in fact extraordinary, firefighter and a fire leader,” U.S. Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen told the gathering at The Rock Church in San Bernardino.

“He committed himself, often for weeks and months on end, to protecting lives, communities and natural resources all around this country in service to fellow Americans.”

The Butte County Sheriff’s Office on Friday released the identity of another of the 15 people killed in a rampaging forest fire earlier this month. The remains of Linda Longenbach, 71, of Berry Creek, were found on Sept. 10 in a roadway about 10 feet from an ATV, close to the body of a man previously identified as Paul Winer, 68.

A relative told investigators the victims were aware of the fire and chose not to evacuate.

<https://www.ky3.com/2020/09/26/largest-california-wildfire-threatens-marijuana-growing-area/>

Destroyed homes, indefinite hotel stays: California wildfire evacuees find lives in limbo

Amanda Ulrich, Palm Springs Desert Sun

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With 25 major wildfires currently burning in California, entire communities and towns have been forced to flee, sometimes for weeks at a time.

When David Harshbarger's house burned to the ground, nearly everything inside turned to ash: his wife's wedding dress, a pair of boots sitting in his closet, the walls of the closet itself.

Other novelties scattered around his property — the result of a decades-long career as a props master for movie sets — were destroyed or contorted into new forms.

A mound of fiberglass now melted into the dirt was formerly a cannon, Harshbarger said, featured in the 1992 movie "The Last of the Mohicans." In the burned-out skeleton of a trailer, his collection of antique shotguns was so badly incinerated that the weapons ceased to exist, leaving the metal cabinet they were stored in charred and empty.

Almost all of Harshbarger's possessions, save for a half-dozen boxes packed at the last minute, were casualties of this month's Bobcat Fire, which continues to burn in Angeles National Forest in Los Angeles County.

"You can't think too much because then when it hits you, it's overwhelming," he said this week, while surveying the wreckage from what used to be his back deck. "You just gotta stay in the moment."

With 25 major wildfires currently burning in California, entire communities and towns across the state have been forced to flee, sometimes for weeks at a time. Many are still waiting for evacuation orders to lift so they can begin to rebuild destroyed houses, or get back to intact ones. Since Aug. 15, fires have destroyed 6,900 structures in the state.

In the age of coronavirus, finding emergency shelter during a wildfire is a changed process. The American Red Cross, for one, has started to prioritize using individual hotel rooms, and sometimes "dormitory-style" rooms for wildfire evacuees. Temporary evacuation points are often open during the day in certain areas. On Wednesday night alone, the Red Cross provided hotel accommodations to more than 180 people evacuating from the Bobcat Fire.

Harshbarger and his wife are living in a hotel for the foreseeable future. For the couple and others like them, a lengthy rebuilding process looms. Harshbarger estimates it'll take six months to a year to clear the debris of his old home and bring in a new one.

At that point, he said, "I think I'm going to be made whole again."

About 70 miles east of the Bobcat Fire, the El Dorado Fire has been burning through the San Bernardino Mountains for the better part of a month. That blaze, made famous after being sparked by a pyrotechnical device at a gender reveal event in early September, is 81% contained.

As El Dorado tore through about 35 square miles of terrain, several mountainous communities dotted along its perimeter were forced to evacuate in recent weeks.

Robert McLaughlin, a self-described "computer guy" for the **San Bernardino County Fire** Department, was busy installing a batch of new 911 dispatch computers on Sept. 9 when he learned he'd have to vacate his home. As he finished setting up the final computer, one of the dispatchers commented aloud that the unincorporated community of Angelus Oaks was under a mandatory evacuation order.

"That was fun," McLaughlin said. "At least I know my computers work."

As panic rose in Angelus Oaks, its roughly 600 residents preparing to leave, McLaughlin chose not to drive back up the mountain to pack a suitcase. He arranged for a neighbor to bring his three dogs, stranded in his house, down to safety.

That first night of evacuation, he paid about \$100 for a room in a pet-friendly Motel 6. The next night, McLaughlin stayed in a friend's trailer. But after taking a wrong step over uneven ground at the friend's property, breaking his foot and ending up on crutches, McLaughlin needed a more long-term solution.

"(The problems) just kept rolling, getting bigger like a snowball," he said.

On day three, McLaughlin went to an evacuation point set up by the Red Cross. He was expecting to be shown hundreds of cots in a high school gym, not offered an individual hotel room.

The hotel in Ontario where McLaughlin has been living also housed many other El Dorado evacuees up until late this week. Because of its new type of guest, the almost sterile formality of the hotel softened into a type of community atmosphere. This past Tuesday, not many people were checking in, but several were getting back from work with dinner in hand.

McLaughlin also found someone to hotel-sit his dogs while he's gone during the day.

"We're all making the best of it," McLaughlin said of living in a hotel for weeks on end. "I actually had a time when I lived in a hotel for two and a half years. It's a place to live."

El Dorado Fire: Evacuation orders lifted for mountain communities

Sheriff investigating: Firefighter killed in El Dorado Fire ID'd as Charles Morton

As Angelus Oaks residents gradually return to their homes, they're not sure what they might find. Firefighters were able to keep the flames at bay, but power will likely be off in certain areas.

And with a ravine on each side of his house, McLaughlin described his property as an "animal freeway." The last thing he saw on his security camera before the power went out was a lone raccoon inside his house, eating the dog food after climbing through the dog door.

With wildlife looking for shelter and the fire burning on the edge of the community, it's the not knowing how things will turn out that's been the hardest part, McLaughlin said.

But on Friday, he added that he "may be going home soon" as evacuation orders turned into a warning.

"Now 'lockdown' isn't so bad after this," he said.

Down the highway from McLaughlin, Malissa Lopez and her husband, Joaquin, took up residence in another nondescript hotel, crammed between a Sam's Club and a Pet World, after leaving Angelus Oaks two weeks ago.

When the community was ordered to leave, Joaquin, who drives a truck for Amazon, had already been gone for work for several days, and Lopez was alone. The couple had moved into a new home in the mountains only four weeks prior to the El Dorado Fire.

"I had to call him and tell him, 'You can't come home, they're evacuating us, the fire has jumped the highway,'" she said. "It was the first (evacuation) that was very scary for me because it was so close to our communities. I cried a lot on the way down."

Lopez and her husband reunited in a Trader Joe's parking lot, where they hugged each other "for a good 30 minutes," she said. Then they considered their options.

At first, there was a flurry of things that needed to get done: finding an available hotel room, calling the insurance company. But the days started to blur together as the evacuation order remained solidly in place.

"After days go by, you start having those moments of, 'Are we ever gonna go home? Is my house is still standing? What kind of damage do we have?'" Lopez said.

With no immediate answers, they adopted new routines in their tiny space. Laundry was done at a friend's house, and they stored perishable foods in a portable cooler, which was kept next to the air-conditioning unit and continually restocked with ice. At night, they pulled a little side table up to the end of the bed and ate dinner on paper plates.

After more than two weeks, the couple checked out of the hotel on Thursday, when orders were formally lifted for Angelus Oaks, and finally returned home. Besides some rotten food in the refrigerator and lots of ash, their house stood unscathed.

The experience has made them think more seriously about wildfire prevention. Lopez and her husband are the proud new owners of four fire extinguishers: one for the kitchen, one for the garage, and one for each car.

"I just hope that people see this, and hear from people who lived through this, and that they really think about what they do next time," she said.

Not everyone has a home to go back to. Harshbarger and his wife are now looking into getting a Red Cross hotel voucher after paying out of pocket to stay in a nearby Marriott.

The Bobcat Fire, which claimed Harshbarger's house and spans nearly 180 square miles, continues to burn as it has for nearly three weeks.

Driving toward the blaze from its more rural, northern perimeter where the Harshbarger home was located, there are signs of the fire's nearness — a splash of hot pink fire retardant here, a "road closed" sign there. As the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains open up, the entire landscape becomes one of blackened trees and burnt ground.

The weight of the situation didn't crash in until Harshbarger saw the destruction for the first time, and started driving away from the newly blighted area. "Our House" by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, came on the radio — that was "our song," Harshbarger said of himself and his wife, when they first moved into their home in 1995.

"That's when I had a mini breakdown," he said.

The community was first put under mandatory orders to leave on Sept. 17. Initially, Harshbarger stayed put, even as a steady procession of his neighbors left, carting out horses and other animals. He remembered the 2009 Station Fire, which came close to the community but eventually stopped.

"And I figured the same thing would happen this time," he said.

That night, Harshbarger could see flames — what he said looked like distant hot coals — on the ridge above his house. Then those flames rolled down the hillside. The fire knocked out the local power grid, rendering worthless the garden hose Harshbarger had planned to use to put out flying embers.

"The fire came through so fast, there was no way I could have kept up with it," he said.

He left the following day. In roughly 24 hours, the house that he and his wife had lived in for a quarter of a century was gone.

Despite losing most of his possessions, Harshbarger is doggedly optimistic; they escaped the fire in time, he pointed out, with the family dog, Buddy, and several cats in tow. They have good insurance on the house. All told, he's adamant that they "could have lost a lot more."

"Nobody got hurt," he said. "It's just stuff. And I'll have fun trying to replace it."

Harshbarger does have one concern: the wellbeing of the birds that live around his property. This week, rather than sort through his own mangled belongings, he drove up with two big bags of birdseed and spread it around the yard.

"When I was up here the other day, the only thing I saw moving were baby quail," he said. "I've been feeding these birds for 25 years. I can't let them down now."

<https://www.desertsun.com/in-depth/news/environment/wildfires/2020/09/26/california-wildfire-evacuees-face-destroyed-homes-indefinite-hotel-stays/3517059001/>