

Background

Despite a significant amount of precipitation in the Sierra Nevada this past winter, over five years of extreme drought has elevated the fire danger throughout the Sierra Nevada to critical levels. To date, more than 162,000 acres have burned along the west slope of the Sierra Nevada, primarily in the lower elevations due to the late spring snow in higher, mixed conifer elevations. The current fire season has seen the fifth highest number of acres burned this decade, with the bulk of the fire season still ahead of us. (We are currently at 1.3 million acres for the decade, a record high. See [Attachment A](#).)

Several fires occurred early in the season that are worth noting:

- The lightning-caused Schaeffer Fire started in late June in the Sequoia National Forest and provided an opportunity to share information consistent with the Fire Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The Schaeffer Fire was initially managed for resource benefit, and burned just over 16,000 acres through the 2002 McNally Fire footprint.
- The Wall Fire in early July burned over 6,000 acres across the foothills of Butte County near the town of Bangor. Forty-one homes were lost and 57 other structures were damaged.
- The Minerva Fire burned approximately 4,300 acres along the south edge of the town of Quincy, placing the town at risk as the direction of the fire changed. SNC staff living in Quincy were placed on voluntary evacuation notice when the fire made a run near town.
- In late July, lightning strikes started approximately 60 fires across the Modoc National Forest. The Modoc Complex fires are now 100 percent contained but burned just over 83,000 acres collectively.
- At the time of this report, the South Fork Fire near Wawona had reached 900 acres in less than 24 hours, with reports of extreme group torching in heavy tree-mortality areas.

The largest fire of the year to date, the Detwiler fire burned nearly 82,000 acres, and, though contained, continues to have resources working the firelines to ensure they hold. The fire started in the Hunters Valley area of Mariposa County, near Lake McClure, at 3:53 p.m. on Sunday, July 16, 2017. It resulted in the evacuation of SNC's Mariposa office and three employees from their homes. Given its impact on the SNC, additional details of the fire are provided below:

When reported, it was 10-15 acres in heavy brush. Evacuations began at 4:30 p.m. in Hunters Valley. By 8:00 p.m., it was at 2,000 acres with 0 percent containment. By 7:30 a.m. Monday, July 17, the fire was at 7,100 acres with mandatory evacuations north on Highway 49 from Pendola Gardens Road to the top of Bagby grade. By 7:00 p.m. that evening, the fire was at 11,200 acres with 0 percent containment.

Late Tuesday morning, July 18, the first staff member from the Mariposa Office was forced to leave their home. By midday, the entire town of Mariposa had the electricity cut off and was evacuated, closing the SNC Mariposa office and resulting in most staff vacating their homes. By 8:30 that evening, the fire had reached 25,000 acres

with extended evacuations from the town of Mariposa to the east, the unincorporated area of Bridgeport to the south, Catheys Valley to the west, and Coulterville, Dogtown, and Greely Hill to the north. On that same day, Governor Brown issued an emergency proclamation for Mariposa County due to the effects of the Detwiler Fire, citing damage to power, water, and communication infrastructure, and threatening homes and businesses.

By Wednesday, July 19, the fire had nearly doubled in size with evacuations expanding on all sides. By the evening of July 20, the fire was at 74,000 acres with 58 residences destroyed. Evacuations were estimated to range between four and five thousand people. Smoke from the Detwiler fire was visible via satellite from Mariposa County to the southwest corner of Idaho. Air quality was at its worst in Mariposa, Merced, and Madera counties, as well as Yosemite National Park, on Wednesday and Thursday, July 19 and 20. The Park remained open, though issued air quality alerts, particularly targeted to those visitors with respiratory issues. Highway 140 from Merced to Mariposa was closed at Hornitos Road, and Highway 49 to Mariposa was closed at Coulterville to the north and nearly to Bootjack to the south, cutting off access to the Tunnel Rock entrance to Yosemite. Visitors could still enter the park via Highway 41 from Oakhurst, and 120 through Groveland. There was no reported reduction in visitation, though the park received innumerable phone calls requesting information on current conditions.

At 7:21 p.m., on Friday, July 21, evacuation orders were lifted for residents in the town of Mariposa and several other locations, though not all, allowing all SNC staff to return to their homes and the office to reopen on Monday, July 25. Fortunately, no SNC staff lost property as a result of this fire.

As of July 28, the fire has burned 81,650 acres (see attached map – [Attachment B](#)), with 131 structures destroyed, 63 of which were homes. Incident reports cite a total of 4,467 personnel fighting this fire, including a total of 114 fire crews, along with hundreds of engines, dozers, water tenders, and aircraft drawn from city, county, state, and federal cooperators all over California, as well as out of state.

Current Status

At the time of this writing, a number of weeks remain in the Sierra Nevada fire season. State, federal, and local agencies stand ready to address fire activity that may occur in the Region and SNC remains hopeful that additional fire activity will not have severe impacts on the landscape and communities.

Next Steps

The SNC will continue its efforts to implement the Watershed Improvement Program and the Tahoe Central Sierra Initiative in order to increase the pace and scale of restoration to minimize the occurrence of large severe wildfires.

Recommendation

This is an informational item only; no formal action is needed by the Board at this time, although Boardmembers are encouraged to share their thoughts and comments.