

Officials warn region not yet out of reduced wildfire danger

September 16, 2020



While the fire danger to Gasquet and the surrounding region has reduced, officials stress the community is not out of the woods yet to the ongoing hazard.

At a special meeting Tuesday, Sept. 15, the Del Norte County of Supervisors declared a local emergency. Also, at the request of Public Health Officer Dr. Warren Rehwaldt, they issued a proclamation declaring a local health emergency due to the Slater and Red Salmon Complex fires.

“We included the Red Salmon Complex on the theory that it might continue to migrate into and across our borders and affect the Klamath watershed and homes and roadways, whatever might be in its path,” Rehwaldt said at the Tuesday meeting. “By making it part of the proclamation, we hope to access funding for remediation should the fire reach us and cause more damage.”

County Administrative Officer Jay Sarina told the supervisors that the primary issue regarding the Slater Fire is damage to road infrastructure on Oregon Mountain Road north of Gasquet.

Sarina said that while a county staff damage assessment was sent to the State of California, a more thorough analysis would need to be conducted. He added the board's resolution would be sent to state officials to be included in any declarations they would make.

"We would then become eligible if there is a federal declaration. Funding could be made available through the federal government and the State of California," Sarina explained.

On Sept. 8, the Slater Fire started near Happy Camp and grew to more than 131,000 acres and is 10 percent contained as of Wednesday morning, Sept. 16. The Devil Fire was detected on Sept. 9 just east in the Seiad Valley area and has since grown to about 4,429 acres and is 0 percent contained.

Because the Slater Fire burned into an area near Oregon Mountain Road and Knopki Creek, Gasquet residents were evacuated to Crescent City Sept. 9. They were allowed to return the next day.

According to the Del Norte Office of Emergency Services, evacuation levels have since been lowered.

Gasquet and Big Flat residents are currently at a Level 1 "be ready" evacuation order.

Residents between Pioneer Road and the Oregon state line are under Level 2 "be set" evacuation orders.

Hiouchi is no longer under an evacuation warning.

Fire officials announced Wednesday morning near Gasquet, firelines are holding along Knopki Road, despite limited available resources there. Firefighters are also working to scout control lines along Monkey Ridge and Oregon Mountain Road to prevent the fire's spread into communities southwest of the fire.

Meanwhile Highway 199 remains closed heading northeast out of Gasquet and due to complications to the cleanup effort from the Slater Fire, officials do not have an estimate when the route will reopen.

"We're working closely with the Oregon Department of Transportation, and once it is safe enough to do so, we'll open 199 together," said Myles Cochrane, Caltrans Public Information Officer.

Cochrane said Caltrans had plans to mobilize and remove hazardous trees from 199 roadway. However, conditions got worse with poor visibility and quality Tuesday afternoon.

"The plan is early Wednesday we'll periodically go in and check conditions," Cochrane said. "If they improve enough, we'll remove trees along the highway, in the roadway, on the shoulder. As soon as we hear there'll be a reopening, even a 3 or 4 hour window, we'll post it immediately on Facebook and Twitter."

Del Norte Office of Emergency Services Public Information Officer Bill Steven said looking at the latest fire maps via tripcheck.com, it's easy to assume everything within the outlined fire areas have burned. He said they have not, adding hazardous conditions continue especially near the Collier Tunnel Rest Area.

"There's a sloping hill heading up to the tunnel, and fire people are worried the fire has the potential to come back up the canyon and hit 199," Steven explained.

He added the Highway 199 closure is troubling for Del Norte residents who use the route to for medical appointments in Josephine and Jackson counties in Oregon.

“I talked to a couple people who were disappointed at having to make the run to Bandon and over to I-5 and I spoke to at least one person who had to fly out this week on business. Between doctors appointments and air travel, it’s caused quite an issue,” Steven said.

He added people are having to go north on 101 and cut over at Bandon to Interstate 5 to Roseburg, or drive south to Arcata and cut over on 299. Either route, Steven said, comes to about six hours.

In a bit of good news, Wednesday was the first day the North Coast Unified Air Quality Management District (NCUAQMD) issued no air advisory for Del Norte County.

According to the NCUAQMD, the air in Crescent City is good, with periods of moderate conditions. In Gasquet, the air is classified as unhealthy for sensitive groups with periods of unhealthy for all groups. And in Klamath, the air quality is listed as overall good, with periods of moderate to unhealthy for sensitive groups.

The NCUAQMD recommends sensitive populations to stay indoors and avoid prolonged activity. All others should limit prolonged or heavy activity and time spent outdoors. Even healthy adults can be affected by smoke. Seek medical help if you have symptoms that worsen or become severe.

They recommend the following general precautions to protect your health during a smoke event:

- Minimize or stop outdoor activities, especially exercise.
- Stay indoors with windows and doors closed as much as possible.
- Do not run fans that bring smoky outdoor air inside – examples include swamp coolers, whole-house fans, and fresh air ventilation systems.
- Run your air-conditioner only if it does not bring smoke in from the outdoors. Change the standard air conditioner filter to a medium or high efficiency filter. If available, use the “re-circulate” or “recycle” setting on the unit.
- Do not smoke, fry food, or do other things that will create indoor air pollution.

Fire information can be found online at <http://inciweb.nwcg.gov>.

Steven said residents have been asking the Office of Emergency Services how they can help and get involved if there are further evacuation orders.

“The Red Cross spent about \$11,000 on hotel rooms for evacuees that Wednesday night,” Steven said. “The best thing you can donate to the Red Cross is cash. Not thousands or even hundreds, they’d be happy if you threw \$10 their way.”

He added this is a good time to reevaluate safety precautions taken in your own homes, as outlined at www.preparedelnorte.com, from preparing a “defensible space” around your home in case of an encroaching wildfire to making sure you have a go bag ready if an evacuation is called.