

Officials feared Slater Fire was hours from reaching Gasquet

September 24, 2020



The Del Norte County Supervisors learned Tuesday just how touch and go the evacuation was for residents of Gasquet Sept. 9.

Jeff Marszal, Gasquet district ranger for the Six Rivers National Forest, said officials feared the Slater Fire might have reached that community by noon the day its residents were told to leave their homes.

As of Sept. 22, residents in Gasquet and Big Flat are at a Level 1 “be ready” evacuation order Marszal said, adding he expects those orders to be lifted soon.

“I’m meeting with the Del Norte County sheriff and fire management officials,” he said. “We’ll probably be lifting that Level 1 considering where we are in the fire.”

Marszal informed the Supervisors the Slater Fire started near Happy Camp on Sept. 8 and burned about 15 miles into Del Norte County by the morning of Sept. 9. It then crossed the Oregon state line, moved along

U.S. Highway 199 and entered the Smith River National Recreation Area near Collier Tunnel. Marszal said this prompted emergency officials to evacuate Gasquet at about 6 a.m.

Caltrans would also close Highway 199 from Gasquet to the Oregon border as they removed fallen trees and debris near Collier Tunnel.

Highway 199 later reopened Sept. 19.

Marszal said the fire fortunately hasn't reached Gasquet. He explained that when the fire entered Del Norte County it got caught up on the Oregon Mountain Road and Knopki Creek areas and has not moved. All available fire resources are concentrated on the Knopki Road area in the south side of the fire.

The Northern Rockies Incident Management Team 2 is now managing the fire's northwest corner, which includes the California and Oregon sides of U.S. Highway 199.

Marszal said on the opposite side of Highway 199, firefighters used dozers to try to contain the fire near Monkey Ridge, protecting transmission lines and a nearby communications site.

It has destroyed more than 150 homes in the Happy Camp area and claimed the lives of two people there. In Del Norte County, the fire destroyed two homes on the north side of the tunnel, but the Collier Tunnel Rest Area and the agricultural station were spared from the flames.

"This was an extreme fire event," Marszal said. "It was driven by extreme wind, heat and historically dry fuels. It was a terrible 24 hours for Happy Camp — I used to live there."

According to [InciWeb.nwcg.gov/incident/7173](https://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/7173), as of Sept. 23, the Slater Fire remains at about 150,230 acres and is now 24 percent contained. The Devil Fire, which sprang up nearby to the east of the Slater Fire, sits at 7,784 acres and is 18 percent contained.

Marszal broke down the amount of area burned by the Slater fire:

- 75,000 acres in the Klamath National Forest
- 55,000 acres in the Rogue River Siskiyou National Forest
- 12,000 acres on private land, including 5,000 acres belonging to Green Diamond Resource Company
- 2,000 acres belonging to the Bureau of Land Management
- 4,186 acres in the Smith River National Recreational Area

"Because of the unprecedented nature of this fire season up and down the Pacific Coast, we've struggled with getting resources on this fire," Marszal said. "We've been completely dependent on local resources — that's Gasquet resources and definitely our local Gasquet volunteers, Crescent City, Fort Dick and up into Brookings Harbor. They're all volunteers that have provided the backbone of resources over the past 7-10 days and we cannot thank them enough. They really do deserve a lot of credit."

