

Minnesota wildfire burns through Superior National Forest

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The Greenwood Fire raging in Superior National Forest is a rapidly growing wildfire in northeastern Minnesota that has burned at least 25,991 acres as of Friday. It is still zero percent contained after burning for several days. There are now 476 firefighters assigned to the Greenwood Fire, one of two large wildfires in the state.

The wildfire, which was first detected on August 15, has drawn hundreds of firefighters and prompted evacuations. On Monday alone, the fire doubled in size, after it produced pyrocumulus clouds that generated lightning and even raindrops, fire officials told NBC News. Across the country, a total of 321,818 acres are currently burning in Washington, 181,907 acres in Oregon, 1,389,391 acres in California, and 314,881 acres in Montana, according to a report Friday from the National Interagency Fire Center.

In a press conference Monday night, Brian Pisarek, one of the officials leading the firefighters, compared the Greenwood Fire to a “freight train.” He continued, “Once it starts rolling, it starts to build up steam and feed off itself.” Pisarek then noted that at least 300 people had to be evacuated from Superior National Forest, which is a checkerboard of federal, state, county and private land dotted with many seasonal cabins and retreats.

The Red Cross opened up two evacuation centers to assist those forced to flee. One was set up at the Finland Community Center in Finland, Minnesota, open 24 hours a day, and another was set up at the ice arena in Babbitt, Minnesota, well west of the fire.

Pisarek has also expressed concern that the firefighters are growing increasingly tired. Crews have been working on fighting and suppressing wildfires since the spring, and he estimated that Minnesota’s wildfire season is not likely to end until snowfall.

The fire has so far destroyed 12 seasonal homes or cabins, 57 outbuildings, and damaged three more properties in the McDougal Lake area this week, according to the local sheriff’s office. Duluth

photographer and writer Michael Furtman told msn.com the situation was similar to throwing a match on acres of dried-out Christmas trees. Furtman, who owns a cabin on Middle McDougal Lake, said he and his wife spent an estimated \$2,000 to hire workers to cut down dead trees and remove potential tinder.

The fire’s growth on Monday forced firefighters to abandon McDougal Lake, about 200 miles northeast of Minneapolis. Much of the damage was caused after the retreat, with firefighters no longer able to protect buildings in that area. “We had crews embedded, and as this fire took off, it was quite an effort to communicate with forces on the ground so they could get out,” said Clark McCreedy, a spokesman for fires on federal lands. Officials have also stated that while firefighters are doing their best to protect the remaining structures, it is still very unsafe for people to return.

McCreedy continued that the area has suffered through “prolonged, severe drought,” making parts of Minnesota look like the fire-prone West this summer. He expressed optimism, however, noting that rainfall is expected in the region in the coming days. “We’re probably going to get more of that moderating weather for the rest of the week. ... That opens the door for fire crews to make progress on the ground.” Agency officials have set a goal of September 1 for full containment.

Whether progress will be made remains to be seen. As noted above, firefighters have not had the resources to gain any containment, and areas including McDougal Lake, Sand Lake and the Highway 2 corridor have been under mandatory evacuation orders. The federal Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness was closed Saturday “due to active and increasing fire activity, extreme drought, limited resources,” the US Forest Service said in a press release.

So far, the fire has been driven by the weather, particularly from high temperatures and winds, dry fuel

on the ground and multiple lightning strikes. Fire behavior analyst, Michael Locke, pointed out in a video update on Tuesday, “The winds were drawn into the fire from all directions. ... It created what we call pyrocumulus clouds [that] went high enough to produce a few sprinkles of rain and even some lightning.”

Pyrocumulus clouds are formed by an intense heating of the air from the surface, either from wildfires or volcanic eruptions. In some cases, the clouds can actually hinder a fire because the moisture that forms the clouds condenses enough to rain. It has become more common, however, that these clouds help spread the fires through increased gusts of wind on the surface and numerous lightning strikes that can start new fires.

Climate experts have been warning that climate change has prepared the ground for extreme weather, including an increase in the frequency and intensity of wildfires in the Northern Hemisphere. This includes the formation of larger and larger pyrocumulus clouds, which more often fan the flames rather than put them out.

Smoke has been another concern for those near the Greenwood Fire, some of which has been caused by controlled fires set in an attempt to contain the blaze. Layers of particulates in the atmosphere pushed air quality to very unhealthy levels in northeastern Minnesota on Thursday, with local officials telling residents to keep windows shut and stay indoors whenever possible.

In addition, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency issued an air quality alert for St. Louis, Carlton, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake and Cook counties that is valid through 8:00 p.m. Friday. Parts of the region will see thicker smoke than others as winds shift. “Fine particle levels are expected to reach ... a level that is considered unhealthy for everyone,” the agency said in a press release. The MPCA said that forecast rain on Friday should temporarily improve air quality.



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