

California wildfires threaten millennia-old giant sequoias

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The ongoing wildfires in California are again threatening the state's millennia-old giant sequoia (also known as giant redwood) trees in central California. The most immediate danger is from the KNP Complex, a recent merging of the recently sparked Paradise Fire and Colony Fire, which has grown to 25,142 acres and is 0 percent contained.

The wild land blaze has already begun to burn into different groves of ancient sequoias with trees at least 200 feet tall and 2,000 years old, as reported by the *San Jose Mercury News*.

The fire was sparked by lightning late on September 9, and continues to expand into Sequoia National Park. It has gained 2,200 acres since Sunday after smoke at the northeast end of the fire dispersed Saturday, allowing airflow to increase and causing the blaze to spread.

Approximately 400 firefighters from the surrounding area local, state and federal agencies are fighting back the uncontrolled wildfire currently battering the precarious habitat for the giant sequoia.

According to the National Interagency Fire Center, 71 large fires have burned 3,219,092 acres in 12 states so far this year. More than 17,000 fire personnel are assigned to fires mostly across the West. In California, nine fires have burned 1,883,805 acres this year.

Any loss of sequoia trees would be an environmental, as well as historical, tragedy. Many of them were beginning their growth contemporaneously with the flourishing of the Ancestral Puebloan culture and the building of their homes and villages among the cliffs at Mesa Verde, as can be seen at Mesa Verde National Park and other well-preserved villages in the US southwest (900-1350 AD).

Low-intensity wildfires have been beneficial to the giant sequoias for thousands of years, as the heat aids in

opening their seed cones, allowing the seeds to drop onto the forest floor and germinate. High-intensity fires, however, brought on by drought, hotter temperatures induced by man-made climate change, and dead trees building up fuel on the forest floor from long-term fire suppression, have increased the threats to these ancient trees.

The KNP Complex encroached into a small area of the Giant Forest on Thursday in the Sequoia National Park area known as the Four Guardsmen. On Friday, firefighters managed to keep the slow-moving fire away from this world-renowned grove of giant sequoia trees where five of the largest trees in the world stand, including the tallest, the General Sherman Tree. When park staff became aware of the proximity of the fire to the Giant Forest, crews were dispatched to wrap the massive trees with fireproof aluminum blankets.

Hotshot crews were assessing the conditions on the ground on Monday to determine if conditions were stable enough for more crews to re-enter the area. Fire officials were unable to determine how severe the damage might be in these areas, which are located in rugged terrain and enclosed by smoke.

Other groves in the park, however, have yet to receive similar protection. According to the *Mercury-News*, a lack of federal funding, local concerns about smoke from controlled burns, and administrative procedures have knee-capped efforts to increase fire resiliency. In addition, California's drought from 2012 to 2016 killed millions of firs, incense cedars, pines and other conifers in the Southern Sierra Nevada, and those are now providing fuel for potentially catastrophic wildfires around many of the untreated sequoia groves.

Last year, the Castle Fire killed between 7,500 and 10,600 giant sequoias, an estimated 10 percent to 14 percent of all the sequoias in the world, mostly in

Sequoia National Forest. At that time, 22 groves burned, about 10 of them severely.

Tim Borden, sequoia restoration and stewardship manager for the Save the Redwoods League, told the *Mercury-News* on Friday that he worries a similar event is now playing out this week. The Bay Area newspaper reported that not only are the two fires in Sequoia National Park threatening multiple groves, a third fire, the Windy Fire, has already severely damaged at least one giant sequoia.

The Windy Fire is blazing through the Tule River Indian Reservation and Sequoia National Forest in Tulare County, according to the *Mercury-News*. It is currently 25,191 acres in size and only 4 percent contained.

Oriole Lake Grove in Sequoia National Park and Peyrone North and South groves in the neighboring Sequoia National Forest, with trees up to 2,000 years old, were also burning according to a report by ABC News. Borden told the Bay Area News Group that “These groves are just as impressive and just as ecologically important to the forest. They just aren’t as well known. My heart sinks when I think about it.”

An evacuation warning is in place and people currently subject to the evacuation warning were urged to be prepared to leave the area if the warning is raised to an evacuation order.

Kings Canyon National Park remains open, but Sequoia National Park is closed to the public. Air quality has severely deteriorated in the area near Kings Canyon and in Three Rivers. Particulate matter numbers were in the hazardous range over the weekend. The smoke has traveled to communities farther away from the national parks and public lands and is causing hazardous air quality as far away as the Central Coast and the Bay Area as well.

Continued protection and mitigation measures for all sequoia groves within the fire area, including the Giant Forest Sequoia Grove are planned for the next few days. Structure protection planning and mitigation efforts for National Park infrastructure will also be taking place. Indirect dozer line construction on Cal Fire protection areas and the western park boundary are planned in order to provide for structure protection at risk in Three Rivers and the surrounding community, according to the Sequoia National Park Incident Information System.



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