

Fawn Fire threatens numerous communities in Northern California

Adria French
26 September 2021

The Fawn Fire, the most recent blaze torching northern California, is now ripping through the Mt. Shasta-Trinity area near Shasta Lake, just north of Redding. It began Wednesday afternoon, allegedly due to arson. Several communities, energy infrastructure and numerous residences are threatened, and evacuations and road and trail closures are in effect.

As of Sunday morning, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire) reports that the Fawn Fire has burned 8,537 acres and is 35 percent contained. The blaze has destroyed 131 structures, damaged 12 structures, and threatens 2,340 structures.

Fire response agencies have issued evacuation orders for the entire surrounding area, including all roads east of I-5 north of Old Oregon Trail and north to Shasta Lake, and thousands of people have been evacuated from the area.

To date, the National Interagency Fire Center has recorded nearly 46,000 fires nationwide, which have burned more than 5.8 million acres. In California, currently there are 10 large fires burning nearly 2 million acres, none of which are fully contained.

A temporary evacuation center was set up in the Shasta College parking lot in Redding, but even that had to be closed because of the college's evacuation, officials said. A new shelter has been set up at the First Church of the Nazarene in Redding. "Approximately 4,000 Shasta County residents are evacuated at this time, with 30,000 residents affected," the Shasta County Sheriff's Office stated in a press release Thursday night. A separate evacuation site was set up for people testing positive for COVID-19.

By Sunday, some evacuation orders had been lifted and others downgraded to evacuation warnings, as fire containment progressed.

CalFire reports that the fire is spreading through steep

and rugged terrain, critically dry and receptive fuel beds in an active area for fire history and drought stressed trees. There is a potential for extreme fire behavior due to continued critically low live and dead fuel moisture and very dry conditions resulting from persistent drought, minimal snowpack and spring precipitation. Bouts of excessive heat have caused record fire danger across northern California. The extreme weather on the West Coast is being driven by man-made climate change and is resulting in more intense and longer fire seasons.

The 2021 fire season in northern California is so severe that CalFire made a special point of advising firefighters and the public in its September 26 Action Plan for the Fawn Fire that "Northern California continues to experience large fire activity and multiple team deployments and will likely experience an extended fire season. It is important to be mindful of and manage fatigue for all resources. **Everyone, every day, returns home safely.**" [Emphasis in original]

CalFire Shasta-Trinity spokeswoman Cheryl Buliavak said the cause of the fire was still under investigation, but she confirmed that a woman seen wandering around near the quarry where the fire is believed to have started was arrested Wednesday night on "fire-related charges." The suspect, 30-year-old Alexandra Souverneva, is also being investigated for starting other fires in Shasta County and throughout the state, said Shasta County District Attorney Stephanie Bridgett.

Bridgett also filed 31 criminal charges against Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) on Friday for its wanton and intentional actions during the Zogg Fire in 2020, which killed four people and incinerated at least 200 buildings, according to a report from the *Los Angeles Times*.

“We have sufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the Pacific Gas & Electric Company is criminally liable for their reckless ignition of the Zogg fire and the deaths and destruction that it caused,” Bridgett told the *Times*. Among the charges are 11 felonies and 20 misdemeanors, including arson and manslaughter. In July, Bridgett said the utility was criminally liable for its role in igniting the fire and that she was investigating the actions to determine the nature of the charges.

The charges filed on Friday were necessary because of PG&E’s “statutory and regulatory duties to mitigate fire risks by removing hazardous trees from around their electrical lines,” Bridgett said. “In this case, they failed to perform their legal duties.”

PG&E’s criminal behavior has also been connected to the 2018 Camp Fire, which was sparked by faulty power lines maintained by the energy corporation. The company pleaded guilty to 84 counts of manslaughter and reached a settlement of \$13.5 billion with the families of the victims.

While a seemingly large sum, the settlement is barely a year of PG&E’s profits. The annual gross profit for PG&E, a private corporation, in 2020 was \$14.571 billion, a 9.56 percent increase from 2019. The company’s annual gross profit for 2019 was \$13.3 billion, and for 2018 was \$12.26 billion. The CEO Geisha J. Williams’ base annual pay for 2018 was more than \$1 million, plus stock and options valued at \$8 million, plus “other” unidentified compensation of \$170,253, for a total 2018 compensation of \$9.25 million.

PG&E’s dilapidated equipment is also suspected to be the cause of this year’s Dixie Fire, one of the largest in California’s recent history. The Dixie Fire razed the town of Greenville along with other towns in California as the growth of the fire exploded and difficult firefighting conditions worsened the effects. The Dixie fire is still the second largest fire in California history, with all of the top five fires occurring in the last three years. After several weeks of burning, the Dixie Fire is now 90 percent contained.



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