

Early season wildfires erupt across Arizona

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28 April 2022

The Tunnel Fire, located approximately 14 miles northeast of Flagstaff along U.S Highway 89, was reported at 4:22 p.m. on Sunday, April 17, 2022, and the proximate cause is unknown but currently under investigation. Wildfire conditions have been primed in the Southwest by the driest conditions in at least 1,200 years, according to a study published in *Nature Climate Change* in February.

More than a week after the fire erupted, it was 43 percent contained as of Thursday morning, and had burnt more than 19,000 acres.

The fire is located in an area with dry grass and brush, with scattered Ponderosa pine. Windy conditions caused the fire to rapidly spread in a northeast direction and caused spotting ahead of the fire, which exploded in size, fueled in part by a multi-year drought made worse by human-induced climate change. The decades-long megadrought, combined with low humidity and high winds, has contributed to the tinderbox conditions in the region.

The Arizona Department of Transportation reported that US 89 had reopened Monday after a temporary closure. US 89 is the main arterial route for transportation to and from Tuba City, which is the primary route residents of the Navajo and Hopi Reservations use to travel to and from Flagstaff.

There has been no update on the number of structures destroyed since Tuesday, April 19, when it was announced that 24 structures had burned. The Sacred Peaks Equine Sanctuary, a non-profit horse rescue, was reduced to smoldering rubble. According to WBUR, owner Kathy Oliver was able to rescue all 22 of her horses even as flames surrounded the farm on Wednesday.

A Red Cross Shelter was opened at Sinagua Middle School at 3950 E. Butler Ave. in Flagstaff for those evacuated from areas affected by the Tunnel Fire, according to Coconino County. Animals were not allowed into the evacuation center. However, household animals could be taken to the Coconino Humane Association at 3501 E. Butler Ave. in Flagstaff, and horses, goats, sheep, pigs and chickens could be taken to the Fort Tuthill County Stables.

Northern Arizona University President Cruz Rivera announced Friday morning that the university will provide

immediate assistance with housing, meals, or emergency funds for all NAU students, according to a tweet by the university.

According to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center, a crew of 76 members of the Pacific Northwest Incident Management Team have been sent to the Tunnel Fire to assist with firefighting efforts.

On Tuesday evening the fire burned through the Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument and kept blazing toward the northeast for another three to four miles. At 4 a.m. Wednesday it was approximately three miles from burning beyond the boundaries of the Coconino National Forest.

Helicopters were used in fire suppression efforts on the fire, which grew to 20,198 acres by Thursday, while crews continued making progress dowsing hotspots along the fire's western flank near Forest Road 420 (Schultz Pass Road) and around Timberline Estates and Wupatki Trail subdivisions.

“There has been a lot of work, progress, and investment on line construction around many parts of the Tunnel Fire,” Deputy Incident Commander Shelby Erickson said last Wednesday. “However, we won’t be declaring areas with line around them as ‘contained’ until we’re confident the line will hold during the forecasted high and shifting winds through the next few days.”

On April 21, Republican Governor Doug Ducey declared a state of emergency to aid communities impacted by the fire. More than 750 households have been evacuated, according to a statement released by his office.

The declaration of emergency will release \$200,000 from the general fund to the Director of the Arizona Division of Emergency Management, Allen Clark.

The Coconino County Board of Supervisors also declared a state of emergency on Tuesday, which allows them to spend emergency money and request assistance from the state of Arizona.

The federal \$1.2 trillion infrastructure legislation signed into law by President Joe Biden in November 2021 included making \$3.3 billion available for wildfire management over several years.

The legislation allocated \$500 million each to thinning

projects, planning and conducting prescribed fires, developing and improving fuel breaks where fires can be stopped or slowed, and mapping and defending at-risk communities. \$1.5 billion is allocated for the US Department of the Interior's (DOI) Wildland Fire Management Program to be administered on the DOI's 7.1 million acres. It also funds fire science research, real-time monitoring equipment and restoration treatments on federal and tribal land with a "very high" wildfire potential.

The federal funding amounts to throwing a bucket of water on a raging fire. The Nature Conservancy estimated in June 2021 that the US requires a minimum of \$5-6 billion every year just to treat high priority forests and fire-proof high-risk communities.

In June 2021, Governor Ducey signed a bill that provided \$100 million in funding to fight wildfires through 2023. The \$100 million appropriation included \$25 million to pay for 720 state prisoners to clear brush and other flammable material under direction of state forestry officials, and some contract clearing operations. Inmates make \$1.50 an hour when they are fighting fires and as little as 50 cents when clearing brush, compared to the median hourly wage of \$22 for a full-time firefighter. The bill had overwhelming bipartisan support in the legislature.

Crooks wildfire near Prescott, Arizona

The Crooks Fire combusted on Monday, April 18, eight miles south of Prescott, Arizona, near Mt. California. On Tuesday, fire authorities said the fire had burned 600 acres in the Prescott National Forest, but it quickly grew to 1,612 acres when it was mapped at 6 p.m. Tuesday. Most of the growth was toward the northeast as it burned south of Potato Patch and past Mt. Union as it approached Big Bug Mesa Road.

The fire is burning in continuous thick, dry, dead and down fuels in very rugged terrain. Erratic winds and fire behavior are making conditions hazardous for firefighters.

The fire is approximately two miles west of the Goodwin Fire that burned more than 28,000 acres in 2017.

On Monday, April 25, a wind from the north pushed the Crooks Fire three miles to the south around Ash Creek, increasing the size to 5,893 acres according to a fixed wing flight very early Monday morning. The northern perimeter of the fire is eight miles south of Prescott, Arizona. The eastern edge is about a mile west of the Goodwin Fire that torched about 28,000 acres in 2017.

The north wind provided favorable conditions Monday to

complete containment operations on the north side to prevent spread to the northwest into Lookout Mountain and Dosoris Canyon. Throughout the day and into the night Monday, firefighters extended the fireline south of Lookout Mountain toward the Ash Creek area and from Moscow Peak west to Senator Highway.

FEMA reported that the fire threatened 700 homes in and around the communities of Potato Patch, Mountain Pine, Groom Creek and Walker. The fire also threatened 50 businesses, local fire stations, a community center, post office, elementary school, and infrastructure power lines in the area.

Research by scientists at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and Lawrence Livermore National Labs (LLNL) published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in November 2021 found that two-thirds (approximately 68 percent) of the increase in vapor pressure deficit (VPD) is due to human-caused climate change. Higher VPD contributes to the greater likelihood of wildfires.

"If mitigation efforts aren't taken, wildfire activity in the western United States will increase, resulting in significant impact on human lives, human health and the economy," said the study's author, climate scientist Benjamin Santer.

"Our results suggest that the western U.S. appears to have passed a critical threshold, and the dominant control on the fire weather variation has changed from natural climate variability to anthropogenically caused warming," explained UCLA's Prof. Rong Fu, who led the study. "The trend toward increasing wildfire risk will likely continue over the western U.S. for decades to come."

2020 was a record-breaking fire season in the history of the western US, especially in California, Oregon and Washington. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, the total area burned in these three states reached 8.8 million acres. Recent studies of fire behavior in the region indicate that warming due to climate change is increasing not only the area burned by fires, but also fire frequency, fire intensity and fire season length.



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