

Apocalyptic Fires Ravaging California: A Sign of the Times?

At least 400 homes and hundreds of other buildings have gone up in flames and one person has been killed in a Northern California wildfire that ranks as the most destructive this summer in the U.S. West, officials said on Monday.

A spokesman for the Lake County Sheriff's Office, Lieutenant Steve Brooks, confirmed the fire fatality but provided no details about the victim's identity or the circumstances of the death.

The so-called Valley Fire, which erupted Saturday afternoon and spread quickly to a cluster of small communities in the hills and valleys north of the Napa Valley wine country, has forced thousands of residents from their homes in the area.

By Monday morning the blaze had devoured about 61,000 acres (24,690 hectares) of tinder-dry forests, brush and grasslands, and was only about 5 percent contained, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire).

About 40,000 acres (16,190 hectares) of the landscape – parched by drought and last week's severe heat wave – were consumed in the first 12 hours of the fire at the peak of its intensity on Saturday and early Sunday, driven by high winds.

Fire officials called the rate of spread unprecedented.

The communities of Cobb, Middletown, Hidden Valley Lake and the Harbin Hot Springs resort were reported to be hardest hit, with many residents chased from their homes with little or no warning.

Reuters video footage from Middletown, a village of about 1,500 residents, showed a smoking, devastated scene of burned-out vehicles, twisted, blackened debris and charred foundations of buildings that had been reduced to ash.

Cal Fire on Monday reported that at least 400 homes and hundreds of other structures were consumed. The bulk of the destruction is believed to have occurred on Saturday.

That tally ranks as the greatest loss of property from a single blaze this season in California, or among the scores of wildfires that have ravaged the drought-stricken western United States so far this summer, according to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise.

More than 1,200 firefighters have been assigned to battle the Valley Fire.

During a briefing for fire managers at a command post in Lakeport, about 100 miles (160 km) northwest of Sacramento, the state capital, officials said they expected the fire's intensity to be suppressed somewhat by an inversion layer that settled over the region on Monday.

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