

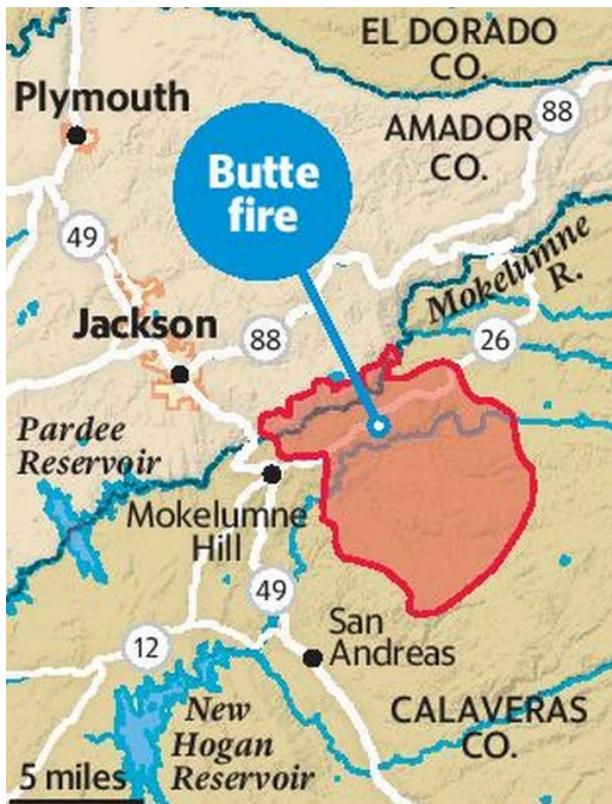


Update: Butte fire containment at 10 percent, 64,728 acres burned

San Andreas residents poised to evacuate

Officials evacuate residents in several hill communities

63 hand crews, 17 helicopters, 246 fire engines fight blaze



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A hot and fast fire that started Wednesday afternoon east of the Amador County town of Jackson has burned 64,728 acres and is forcing

evacuations in the dry hills east of Highway 49.

Calaveras County sheriff's officials on Friday afternoon initially ordered the evacuation of parts of the town of San Andreas as flames mounted the ridges to the east, but rescinded that order late in the day. San Andreas residents were told to be ready, however, for a quick order to leave, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection officials said.

West Point and rural Rail Road Flat residents were under mandatory evacuation orders Friday evening. Firefighters reportedly were focusing helicopter forays in the Murphys area as well.

The fire had burned at least six homes, threatening thousands more, and was 10 percent contained Saturday morning. Gov. Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency Friday afternoon in Calaveras and Amador counties.

The fire's cause is under investigation, officials said. There were no reports of deaths or injuries as of Friday evening.

The blaze, called the Butte fire because it started near Butte Mountain Road, has proved to be tricky, officials said. Hot and dry weather, steep topography, and dry trees and brush combined to speed the fire's spread on multiple flanks, and prompted concerns that the fire could continue growing fast through the weekend.

"What we are seeing on this fire is explosive growth," Cal Fire spokesman Daniel Berlant said.

The mood Friday afternoon was frantic and frazzled as residents tried to get to safe locations. Police were controlling normally quiet intersections as they tried to help residents get away from the fire area.

In some cases, residents had only minutes to evacuate their homes as the fire approached.

One of those, George Pisan, left after flames hit the ridge 100 yards from his Big Bar Road home. He and his wife are staying a friend's place nearby.

"We saw 30-foot flames popping out of trees," he said. "Last night, it kind of looked like Christmas. It looks pretty but it is deadly."

Pisan's house appeared to be safe Friday, but he was not ready to go back, saying the unpredictable blaze could turn back at any moment.

As of Friday evening, 2,400 firefighters were reported battling the fire. Sixty-three hand crews, 17 helicopters and 246 fire engines worked the blaze, but hot and dry conditions plus a focus on defending structures limited fire crews' ability to suppress the fire's growth.

Lois Garmin, 90, and her son Greg decided Friday to stay on their property near the Calaveras County line, but the Garmins said they weren't going to let their 24 quarter horses remain in harm's way. On Friday, 17 volunteers helped corral the animals for evacuation. It was not without incident. Greg was trampled by one of his horses but bounced right up. He was wearing a helmet.

"I'm just here helping getting horses loaded," said a friend, Rick Lacoursiere. "Everyone is coming together. We are trying to get the horses out."

Lois Garmin said there is not much vegetation around her stucco home, so she and her son are staying. "The wind is in the right direction to blow it the other way," she said. "It's good for us but not good for them."

Pam Hopkins of San Andreas stood on a ridge line with her son watching the fire creep toward her town. She was trying to decide where she could go with her dogs.

"Twenty-four years ago I had to evacuate a fire," she said. "It's the most frightening thing. It's so close to town ... I never thought I'd see it this close. I'm hoping they can stop it."

State officials on Friday said the Butte fire and the larger Rough fire in Fresno County are part of a troubling trend with negative consequences for the state's water supply. More than 1 million acres of wildlands have burned on the Sierra west slope since 2010, putting the Sierra on course for its worst fire decade in history.

The Sierra western slope provides 60 percent of the state's water, said Bob Kingman, assistant executive officer of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency that is monitoring the effects of fire on mountain watersheds.

Kingman said the drought, climate change and state and federal forest management policies are teaming up to pose more erosion and silt problems for

water delivery systems, including reduced storage capacity. His agency and others at the state and federal levels, and among private businesses, are working on strategies to return forests to more natural and fire-resilient states that don't produce as many major fires.

"We are on a bad trajectory," he said. "Every time we have a fire in these watersheds, it impacts the water supply and quality to the entire state."

He said the Butte fire, likely still in its early stages, is worrisome. "Everyone is keeping a sharp eye on this fire," he said. "It has the ingredients to grow into another huge fire."

Evacuation centers were set up at the Jackson Rancheria Hotel and the Calaveras County Fairgrounds.

Numerous roads were closed in the area Friday. For an updated listing of the closures and evacuation orders, go to the CalFire website: <http://ow.ly/S6Z0k>.

The Cal Fire information hotline is 530-647-5218.

The state Department of Insurance said some people may be eligible for reimbursement for living expenses if they are forced to evacuate. For more information, call the department's consumer hotline at 800-927-HELP (4357).

Several high school football games were canceled Friday due to heavy smoke from the fire, including a scheduled game between Sacramento's Grant High School and Bullard High School in Fresno.

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Bee staff writer Cathy Locke contributed to this report.

Read more here: <http://www.sacbee.com/news/state/california/fires/article34863024.html#storylink=cpy>