

Wildfire burns 300 acres, forces evacuations

Exceptionally dry conditions for late November



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Updated at 10:06 p.m. — A late-November wildland fire whipped by fierce winds had residents in the hilly Soda Canyon Road area east of Silverado Trail fleeing for safety Thursday night.

Fearing the fire could become a big one, authorities told about 50 families leave their homes for safety on the Napa Valley floor. Meanwhile, fire units from as far away as Santa Clara pounced on the blaze.

The fire consumed 300 acres overnight before firefighters began to gain the upper hand.

By late Friday afternoon, the fire was considered 70 percent contained, with the scope of the blaze still at 300 acres, CalFire/Napa County reported. CalFire Capt. Tiffany Mercado said Friday night the agency expected to increase containment to 80 percent by Saturday morning.

The fire, whose cause is under investigation, occurred a day after a two-day rainstorm that had dampened a parched countryside that hadn't seen significant precipitation since last December.

The recent rains did not do much to curtail the risks of fire, according to CalFire/Napa County Fire representatives. In addition, Thursday's northerly, dry winds allowed the fire to spread very rapidly.

"It's still very dry," CalFire/Napa County Fire Battalion Chief Barry Biermann said Friday. "We've had very little rainfall this year."

The vegetation fire broke out Thursday night on the hills east of Silverado Trail near Soda Canyon Road. It was first reported at about 9:30 p.m. Thursday.

Fire officials, who faced strong and erratic winds all day Friday, do not know when the fire will be fully contained. Winds were predicted to decrease by 10 p.m. Friday.

Mandatory evacuations for residents along Loma Vista, Shady Oaks and Ridge drives were imposed Thursday night. The order was lifted just before 6 p.m. Friday.

Initially, about 50 structures were threatened, but only one outbuilding burned, Capt. Amy Head of CalFire/Napa County reported Friday morning. A firefighter was treated for a strained neck.

Napa County sheriff's deputies and the California Highway Patrol closed Soda Canyon Road on Thursday night to traffic, as fire trucks rushed to the rare late November wildfire. Silverado Trail remained open to traffic throughout.

Responding to the evacuations and uncertainty surrounding the fire's course, the American Red Cross opened an evacuation shelter at the Napa High School gymnasium for a few hours Thursday night. A Red Cross volunteer was assigned to the evacuation zone, said Napa Red Cross Director Anne Steinhauer.

About 50 families were being evacuated, but as of around 1 a.m. Friday only five people had showed up at the gym. Eventually they all left to seek other accommodations.

Most of the evacuees stayed with family and friends, said Napa County Sheriff's Capt. Tracey Stuart. Others refused to leave their homes, she said.

The fire erupted on an evening when the National Weather Service had warned of winds above 35 mph in the North Bay, and above 50 mph at higher elevations.

More than 200 firefighters responded to the fire Thursday, with relief crews taking over Friday. In addition to the firefighters, other public safety responders came from Napa Police, the Sheriff's Office, California Highway Patrol, Napa County Animal Control and Napa County Search and Rescue volunteers who helped evacuate the residents.