

[Email this article](#)[Click to send](#)[Print this article](#)[Click to print](#)[Most popular pages](#)[Today](#) | [This Week](#)

Napolitano to tour fire sites, talk to residents

David J. Cieslak

The Arizona Republic
Jul. 9, 2004 10:50 AM

SAFFORD - Gov. Janet Napolitano this afternoon will take an aerial tour of the wildfires burning in the Pinaleno Mountains, then meet in the early evening with area residents in Safford.

Napolitano is expected to arrive about 3:45 p.m. for a discussion with fire officials about the "Nuttall" and "Gibson" fires, which have charred a combined 26,850 acres. The fires continue to threaten the Mount Graham International Observatory and some 90 cabins in the nearby community of Turkey Flat.

After meeting with fire officials and touring the fires from the air, the governor will speak with area residents at a community meeting, scheduled for 6 p.m. at the Ruth Powell School gymnasium in Safford.

Meanwhile, firefighters were hoping that scattered rain showers expected Friday afternoon and throughout the weekend could lend a hand in knocking down the fires. The light rain that fell Thursday helped raise the humidity level from about 15 percent to the 30-40 percent range and slow the growth of the flames.

But officials warned early Friday of the potential for flash floods in the mountains and urged firefighters to take precautions if rain begins to fall.

"This mountain is a mountain of extremes," fire safety officer Bruce Malloy said. "It's going to be cold and you might get wet, so make sure you're prepared."

More than 900 firefighters and support personnel are battling the fires, which have costing taxpayers an estimated \$6.6 million so far. Officials on Thursday estimated that the fires are 35 percent contained.

Flames remain less than a mile from the cabins in Turkey Flat, where firefighters on Thursday continued laying water lines and clearing debris in an effort to save the evacuated community.

At the observatory, a \$130 million complex managed by the University of Arizona, hotshot crews conducted burnouts to rob the fire of fuel. Those operations will continue Friday as firefighters work to eliminate a vulnerable spot west of the complex where flames have come within 300 yards, officials said.

Hotshot crews and firefighters on the front lines say their work is exhausting but the rewards plentiful.

Though his working environment is a blackened hillside filled with the pungent smell of smoke, 20-year-old firefighter Brendan Smith said he wouldn't want things any other way.

"This is addicting. It's an adrenaline rush. There isn't a better job out there," said Smith, a member of an elite hotshot crew based in Lassen, Calif.



Deirdre Hamill / The Arizona Republic

A firefighting helicopter flies past a burning mountainside near Safford on Thursday.

Smith's father wants him to take over the family's construction business. His girlfriend doesn't care what he does as long as he's not fighting fires.

But Smith's mind is made up.

"Every little kid wants to be a firefighter or a policeman," said Smith, who joined a fire crew the day he graduated from high school. "The best part is you get to travel, check out the world. This is just as good as school because you learn something new every day."

Fellow Lassen hotshot Derek Neuenschwander, 23, agreed, saying he doesn't mind the stress of digging fire lines all day or the long stretches away from home. The payoff, he said, is being able to sleep under the stars.

"It's pretty much a paid camping trip," he quipped. "I don't think I could ever take a desk job. This is freedom."

Firefighter Shawn Guerrero, who is spending his second year with the Northwest Fire District based in Tucson, said he has found a second family in his crew.

Guerrero, 20, who spent Thursday clearing vegetation around the Noon Creek Campground in the Pinaleno Mountains, said he's used to the grueling work and the tough conditions.

"After a while, it seems like second nature to sleep on a mountain and get up at 5 in the morning," he said.