

Firefighters struggle to protect Arizona homes

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SAFFORD, Arizona (AP) -- Firefighters on rugged Mount Graham focused their efforts Thursday on protecting two communities of summer homes endangered by wildfires that have charred nearly 25,000 acres, and to reinforcing protection for a mountaintop observatory.

Nearly 100 homes were at risk in Turkey Flat and Columbine on the flanks of the mountain in southeastern Arizona. Two lightning-caused blazes were about two miles apart and could possibly merge.

One blaze, estimated at 15,899 acres, was burning up a canyon and officials were worried it would reach Turkey Flat, a community of about 74 cabins.

Wind-blown embers were expected to start spot fires outside containment lines but incident commander Dan Oltrogge said crews were ready to jump on them.

Protection of Turkey Flat was a major concern Thursday, said Pruett Small, an operations section chief.

"This is the critical piece today," Small said.

The fire also was within a quarter-mile of the \$200 million Mount Graham International Observatory, home of some of the world's most powerful telescopes.

The other fire, which had burned 9,029 acres, was about 1 1/2 to 2 miles from Columbine, a community of about 15 homes and cabins.

Fire crews earlier had reported a higher acreage figure but said Thursday that infrared mapping allowed them to reduce their estimate.

The two fires were approaching the observatory from different directions, but officials were hopeful they could save the facility. It was nearly surrounded by defensive lines cut by bulldozers and reinforced with burned out areas and a sprinkler system. Crews hoped to enhance the line Thursday if weather allowed them to set more backfires.

"We feel really good about the observatory. The jury is still out on Turkey Flats," said Paul Summerfelt, deputy incident commander for the team fighting the fires.

The terrain around Turkey Flat is some of the most rugged and dangerous in the Pinaleno Mountains.

"It's going to be difficult," Oltrogge said.

The two blazes were considered 25 percent contained, according to authorities, who said the firefighting effort had cost \$5.8 million thus far.

Some Turkey Flat residents feared the flames would reach the community's cabins, many of which have been passed down in families for generations.

"I just have a feeling that it's going to be all gone," said Judy Rhoads, adding that she and her grandchildren cry at the thought of losing the family's cabin.

Elsewhere in Arizona, a fire had blackened 101,500 acres of the Tonto National Forest west of Payson, a town of some 14,000 people. The blaze was 25 percent contained Wednesday and was not threatening any homes or communities.

The same fire had closed the only direct highway linking Phoenix to Payson, a popular summer destination, and officials said Thursday the normally busy route would remain closed for a few days.

In central Washington state, firefighters made progress against one of two fires near Lake Chelan. A voluntary evacuation order was lifted Wednesday night for about 45 homes in the area of the 4,205-acre fire about 3 miles east of the lake and the Columbia River.

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