

Gibson, Nuttall fires subsiding

Uncontained portions have nowhere to go

By Dan Sorenson
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

High humidity and scattered rain over the Pinaleno Mountains tamed most of the remaining trouble spots in the Nuttall Complex Fire as some residents who were evacuated from their mountaintop homes will be allowed to check on their properties today.

As of Sunday, the Gibson and Nuttall fires had burned a total of 29,269 acres. Crews had the fire - the two lightning-caused blazes are being fought as one - about 55 percent contained. The fire has cost \$8 million to fight.

Crews have been able to keep the fire from damaging the observatory on Mount Graham and scores of private homes in the area, about 75 miles northeast of Tucson. With the fire's threat decreasing, the number of people battling the blaze will be scaled back, officials said.

"It's a mop-up phase now," said Bill Duemling, an incident command center spokesman.

Plans call for bringing in a Type II command team from New Mexico to replace the Type I team overseeing the fire, and reducing the work force from 800 people to about 250 by Tuesday night.

Some residents who were evacuated after the wildfires threatened their mountaintop homes were going to be allowed to assess the damage to the surrounding area for the first time today, fire officials said.

Representatives from Turkey Flat, Columbine and a church camp were to be escorted to the charred areas on Mount Graham and report their findings to the other homeowners and campers, said Kent Romney, a fire spokesman.

Fire managers didn't know when residents evacuated from Turkey Flat's 74 cabins and Columbine's 15 cabins would be able to return home.

Safety is still an issue due to ongoing fire operations, lightning and possible flooding, said Duemling.

A lightning strike Saturday evening started a small fire near the southwest perimeter of the Nuttall Complex Fire on Mount Graham but crews were letting it burn itself out, officials said Sunday.

Duemling said the one-acre blaze near Clark Peak was allowed to burn because it wasn't expected to grow fast or cross the fire's perimeter line.

Though rain on the mountain helps fight the fire, it can also cause problems.

Duemling said fire commanders were concerned about expected monsoon flooding but had not seen any evidence of dangerous erosive runoff from the half-inch of rain that fell on some parts of the mountain Saturday night.

A lot of work remains, even though officials say the fire is far closer to being over than the 55 percent containment figure would indicate.

Duemling said the majority of the remaining uncontained perimeter of the fire, nearly all on the north flank, has nowhere to go. He said it is reaching a lower altitude where there are no large trees or significant amounts of fuel.

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Nuttall Complex fire

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But Duemling said a remediation team has its work cut out for it with a vast area, much of it extremely steep, scorched by a hot fire and monsoon rains expected. He said the team is already on the mountain, deciding how to prevent erosion and other damage from the fire.

Among the techniques used are planting grass as soon as a fire is controlled by dropping seeds from helicopters and using downed trees and other debris to impede water runoff and hold back sediment.

• *The Associated Press contributed to this story. Contact Dan Sorenson at 434-4073 or at dsorenson@azstarnet.com.*

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