

Soda Complex fully contained; firefighters head to other fires

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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MENDOCINO NATIONAL FOREST — After five weeks and millions of dollars in firefighting costs, the Soda Complex has reached full containment, the US Forest Service reported Sunday.

The complex of four fires, touched off June 21 by a dry lightning storm, has burned approximately 8,652 in an area 15 miles northwest of Upper Lake and in the vicinity of Lake Pillsbury on the Mendocino National Forest's Upper Lake Ranger District.

The last of the fires to be contained was the Mill Fire, totaling 3,043 acres, which also was the complex's largest blaze. Other fires previously contained included the Monkey Rock, 1,829 acres; Big, 2,193 acres; and Back, 1,567 acres.

Forest Service spokesman Marc Peebles said the fire has cost an estimated \$17,156,942 to suppress, although he added that isn't a final tally, as not all of the costs have been finalized.

Although the fire is contained, the work for firefighters is far from over. Peebles said fire crews are conducting fire line rehabilitation. "They're also still in somewhat of a mop up and control status."

On Sunday there were still 655 fire personnel, eight crews, nine engines, one dozer, 10 water tenders and two helicopters assigned to the fire, according to Peebles.

Many of those firefighters are now being sent to other National Forest fires, including the Iron and Yolla Bolly complexes, Peebles said. However, fire crews who have been on the fire lines in excess of 14 days are being given a few days off before being reassigned.

Peebles is part of Dave Fiorella's Southern California Interagency Incident Management Team No. 3, which has been managing the fire from its headquarters at Upper Lake High School. Other agencies involved in the firefighting effort include Cal Fire; Bureau of Indian Affairs; Fish, Wildlife and Parks; the National Park service; and private entities.

On Monday at 7 a.m. the team is due to return management of the Soda Complex to the Mendocino National Forest's Upper Lake Ranger District, Peebles said.

A scaled-down firefighting crew will be maintained on the complex for mop up and patrol, Peebles said. He reported that some smoke from the interior of the fire area may be seen for a period of time, but should not threaten the containment lines.

Peebles said he's not sure which fire the incident management team will be heading to next, although they're likely to head home to Southern California for some rest first, since they've reached their mandatory 21-day time out on assignment.

He said the team thanked the various agencies and the town of Upper Lake for their continued support and assistance during this incident.

The team is one of three from Southern California, Peebles said. Although they often stay in their home territory, they've been spending more time in recent years in Northern California, he said.

"In the last couple of years this has been a very, very busy place," he said.

Northern California incident teams also have helped out in Southern California when it's been needed, he said. "Firefighters go where the fires are."

He added, "California has one of the absolute best master mutual aid systems in the nation," which is how local, state and federal firefighters can mobilize so quickly.

Most of the fires burning around California now are on National Forests, Peebles said.

The National Interagency Fire Center reported Sunday that 14 active fire complexes are still burning on National Forests, and have scorched approximately 617,918 acres.

The June 21 lightning storm that touched off the Soda Complex ignited as many as 50 fires on the Mendocino National Forest. Included among those is the Vinegar Fire, a portion of which is on the forest and which has burned 38,160-acres. It's 10-percent contained.

That fire is being managed as part of the Yolla Bolly Complex, which was placed for a time under the same supervision as the Lime Complex. However, the Yolla Bolly Complex — located in the Yolla Bolly-Middle Eel Wilderness — has grown to approximately 64,615 acres in Mendocino, Tehama and Trinity counties, the Forest Service reported. That complex is 20-percent contained.

The Yolla Bolly and Lime complexes are sources of smoke that could end up in Lake County's air basin should the winds shift.

However, on Sunday, Air Pollution Control Officer Bob Reynolds said the blue skies that had appeared over the weekend are likely to continue, with west to northwest winds expected to prevail through Tuesday. Those winds will carry smoke from the major wildland fires to the north and east of the county's air basin, Reynolds said.

With the Soda Complex's full containment, Peebles reported that Pogie Point and Navy Campgrounds at Lake Pillsbury are now reopened to the public and no longer being used as sleeping areas for firefighters. The temporary flight restriction over the complex also has been lifted.

The public is cautioned to be very careful with fire and smoking in the area, where Peebles said fire danger is — and will remain — very high.

The Sanhedrin Wilderness and the southern portion of the Yuki Wilderness in the Upper Lake Ranger District will remain closed until further notice, according to Peebles.

Also remaining closed at this time are portions of the M1 road are closed between the intersections of the M1 with the M6 and M61, Peebles reported. The access road to the Mill Fire, Road 20N04, is closed to the general public to provide

firefighting personnel safety, but is open to property owners and residents. For information on forest road closures call the Upper Lake Ranger District, 275-2361.

For more information about the forest fires visit Forest Service Web site at www.fs.fed.us/r5/mendocino or www.inciweb.org. For information about other fires around the state, visit www.cdf.ca.gov.

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