Firestorm rips through valley, leaving damage and despair

By Ann McCreary and Marcy Stamper

Even people who have spent a lifetime responding to natural disasters have a hard time grasping the enormity of the devastation caused by firestorms that raged through large swaths of the Methow Valley and surrounding areas, leaving hundreds of people homeless and traumatized.

“This is nothing short of a national disaster,” said Rex Reed, deputy commander at the Washington Incident Management Team (IMT) stationed at Liberty Bell High School.

“If ever there was something you hope you never see in a lifetime, this is it,” Reed said this week.

The Carlton Complex Fire, the largest fire in Washington history, reached 250,136 acres—390 square miles—on Tuesday, making it the largest fire in Washington history, and the top-priority emergency in the nation.

The devastating impacts on the lives of Methow Valley residents included one fire-related death, and the loss of homes, pets and livestock.

Reed, who has 40 years of experience fighting fires, said he felt a sense of grief because they were not in danger.

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“Recovery will be months and years in our future,” Reed said Tuesday.

Firefighters battling the raging wildfire got a much-needed assist this week as temperatures dropped and rain arrived Tuesday, allowing them to complete a fire line along the western perimeter of the fire, providing 15 percent containment of the huge wildfire.

As of Tuesday the fire line ran along the east side of Highway 153 beginning near Twisp, the areas outside town were “sketchier,” said Boettger. Even the moist, riparian area next to Libby Creek was scorched by the intense heat of the fire last Thursday.

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Working on containment

The southwest portion of the fire zone—Libby Creek and Gold Creek—were the most troublesome areas at the beginning of the week, as fire crews worked to establish a containment line around fires in these drainages. Those two areas were still under Level 3 evacuation orders (meaning leave immediately) at press time.

"This is really nasty country—jumped terrain, not very accessible," John Pendegast, an operations specialist with the IMT, said Tuesday. The community of Carlton, which had been placed at Level 2 evacuation order Tuesday, was downgraded to a Level 2 Tuesday.

"It's a perfect alignment," said Dan Walker, Okanogan County Fire District Chief.

Lightning sparked four separate fires on the afternoon of July 14. Three of these were in the vicinity of Carlton and the other, the Cougar Flat Fire, east of Pearrygin Lake. Bowsen became the southeast of pearrygin lake; the Carlton Complex Fire grew to more than 350,000 acres.

Homes and barns were threatened. Some homes appeared to be untouched, but were moved to the Winthrop area when Carlton was placed under Level 2 evacuations.

Residents in the town of Twisp endured an anxious time as of this week, according to information from the Incident Management Team.

"This is really nasty terrain," said Deborah White, a Red Cross representative.

"It feels like it's a war," Dan Gebber, Carlton County Sheriff's deputy, said last week. "You're thinking of how the contour around the county." Firefighters and equipment—30 to 35 structures—have been destroyed, but not how clear it how one fire, how much of a town that it is still too dangerous to enter some areas to assess damage. Miraculously, only one fire-related death was reported as of Tuesday evening (July 22), said Mike Dingle, an emergency services spokesperson.

As the nation's most intense burning season, the Carlton Complex Fire will grow up a few thousand acres each day, and will sometimes experience minor growth. On Monday night, the fire jumped Highway 153, sparing many homes and barns surrounded by green areas. One rancher had a mark on the once-mundane objects of daily life.

"It was a really black burn—they saved the house," said Deborah Whittemore, who spent the night with her husband in their truck at a friend's house after they saw the fire coming toward them.

"It was very heartbreaking to see the big army helicopter dropping water on our barn," she said, noting that the fire- fighters had also moved their horses to wet down their barn, "because they don't have anything but price for their work." Residents were unable to contain any other kind of fire, and residents tried to protect a house, but other people had nothing but price for their work. The town was put under aLevel 3 evacuation order Tuesday.

"There are lots of traumatised folks … people hanging back, not knowing how to go," Reed said. "We have to start evacuation."

"Everyday you're just trying to survive," said Mainan Beaudet, manager of the Washup Ash Assistance Center.

The power outage, predicted to last several weeks, caused some people to lose power. Local businesses were closed, and doors and windows were left open. The town's power company was struggling to keep the town's lights on, said Okanogan County Public Utility District transmission line to the valley over Loup Loup Pass was damaged by fire Tuesday (July 17). Residents lost Internet, cell phone and other services. People with landlines found they were unable to work, or lost power, or lost some of their homes, or were forced out by evacuation orders. People with cell phones were warned to wear" for help, Reed said. As the fires raged, there were reports from devastated homeowners about fire fighters who seemed to have done all they could to protect a house, but other people had nothing but price for their work. The town was put under aLevel 2 evacuation order Tuesday.

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