

Bush consoles evacuees, promises aid

SHOW LOW, Ariz. (AP) - As one of the worst wildfires in the history of the West devoured more ground Tuesday, President Bush declared the charred region a disaster area and consoled evacuees at a school that has become a mass shelter, telling them: "Hang in there. You're brave and great people."

The president toured the area by air and saw a string of devastated mountain communities that have lost at least 390 homes and dozens of businesses to flames feeding on paper-dry underbrush and stands of ponderosa pine. Some 30,000 people have fled their homes, and some will be helped by funds made available under the disaster declaration.

"We're kind of used to big fires out West," Bush said, "but this is the biggest of big fires."

The blaze has blackened 375,000 acres or 586 square miles, an area larger than Los Angeles, with no containment in sight. Smoke has spread across the Southwest and was seen as far south as Las Cruces, N.M.

It is by far the biggest and most damaging fire of what is still a very young fire season.

A blackened buffer zone carved overnight kept the fire on the outskirts of the mountain town of Show Low, the region's abandoned economic hub. But the blaze roared on its western flank, where 15 more homes burned.

"It's like a tidal wave, it's just amazing," fire spokesman Ed Perault said. "It's fire like a lot of folks have never seen."

With his shirt sleeves rolled up, Bush told about 300 evacuees at a high school cafeteria in nearby Eagar that "a lot of people in our country are pulling for you."

"They understand that a lot of you are living in tents when you'd rather be in your own bed," Bush said. "They cry for you and they hurt with you and I'm here to say on behalf of the American people, God bless you."

He shook hands with firefighters and evacuees, and heard a grim assessment from Larry Humphrey, a fire commander with the Bureau of Land Management.

"With the fuel built up and the dryness of the conditions there's not a heck of a lot we can do," Humphrey said.

On the western edge of Show Low, bulldozers dug a 60-foot-wide scar in the ground and crews set fires to burn their way back to the larger blaze, depriving it of new fuel.

Less than a half-mile from Show Low's homes, gray smoke turned to black as

flames shot through the tops of trees along the fire line.

"It's really starting to cook," said Don Buttyan, who works for the fire department in the town of 7,700.

The fire was wreaking its worst damage Tuesday on its western flank: In the Heber-Overgaard area, about 35 miles west of Show Low, at least 238 homes and six businesses have been destroyed. A fish hatchery, ranch and hundreds of homes could be in danger depending on what the fire does next.

"We know about our place. It's burned down," said Jerry Roeller, 68. "We saw it on TV about a hundred times."

Roeller and his wife, Martha, lived in the Pinecrest Lakes RV Park in Overgaard. Videotape of the park showed burned-out metal shells and charred foundation where homes once stood. The Roellers were staying at a motel until they could return to see if there is anything to salvage.

"I want to stand on the ashes if I have to," Roeller said. "But I want to see the place."

The wildfire, formed by two smaller blazes that merged Sunday, is the largest in Arizona history. A lost hiker started one fire trying to signal for help. The other fire is believed to be human-caused, but the exact origin has not been determined.

With the number of homes lost, the fire has done more damage than the Los Alamos, N.M., blaze that destroyed about 220 homes and businesses two years ago.

"I've been doing this 29 years. This is the worst fire I've been on and our team was the first on the scene at Los Alamos," Humphrey said.

In Colorado, hot weather and shifting wind made it another miserable day for firefighters near Durango. A fire there has burned nearly 67,000 acres, at least 45 homes and damaged hundreds of power poles, cutting off electricity to more than 500 abandoned homes.

"Durango is just full of smoke," added David Waller, spokesman for the La Plata County Electric Association. "Every morning we wake up to thick smoke."

Southwest of Denver, crews had 70 percent containment of a 137,000-acre fire. The 2,500 evacuees still waiting to return home. They worried their community near Deckers, about 40 miles southwest of Denver, would never be the same.

"All of a sudden, I find myself tongue-tied," said Ruth Johnson, 79.



President George W. Bush looks out the window of Air Force One during an aerial tour of the forest fires over Springerville, Arizona on Tuesday.



NEWS IN BRIEF

Confidence falls in June, home sales sag in May

NEW YORK (AP) - Consumer confidence sagged to a four-month low in June, dragged down in part by anxiety over the corporate accounting scandals.

The Conference Board's Consumer Confidence Index fell to 106.4 in June from a revised 110 in May, the second-biggest drop since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Analysts were expecting a reading of 110.

A separate report showed that sales of previously owned homes also dipped in May, though the figure was still the fourth-highest monthly level on record, thanks largely to low mortgage rates.

Judge enters innocent plea for Moussaoui

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (AP) - federal judge refused Tuesday to change the plea of Zacarias Moussaoui's attorney and entered a plea of innocent on his behalf during a volatile hearing for the man charged in connection with the Sept. 11 attacks.

Throughout his arraignment a short distance from the Pentagon, Moussaoui clashed with U.S. District Judge Leonie Brinkema over his legal rights.

"I have no plea. I will plead no contest. I have nothing to say to the United States. That's all," he declared.

Brinkema interrupted Moussaoui, who was flanked by U.S. marshals, as he stood before the judge and told him a plea of contest - nolo contendere.

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