

Western Wildfires

Crew finds remains of 2nd fire victim

Officials start lifting evacuation orders as Obama visits hard-hit areas

By Thomas Peipert
Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo.—Firefighters searching for bodies in smoldering piles of the nearly 350 homes burned to the ground by the most destructive wildfire in Colorado history found a second body Friday at a residence where another person was found dead earlier.

As crews on the front lines made slow but steady progress against the flames, Police Chief Pete Carey said fewer than 10 people altogether were unaccounted for. The remains of one person were found Thursday in what was left of one home. He confirmed that the remains of a sec-

ond person who lived there were found Friday.

The 26-square-mile blaze—one of several wildfires burning out of control across the tinder-dry West—was reported to be 25 percent contained, and authorities began lifting some of the evacuation orders for the more than 30,000 people who fled their homes a few days ago.

After growing explosively earlier in the week, the fire gained no ground overnight, authorities reported Friday. And the weather was clear and mostly calm, a welcome break from the lightning and high wind that drove the flames.

“The focus for today is to hold what we got,” ex-

tend the fire lines to contain more of the blaze, and bring in more heavy equipment, said Rich Harvey, incident commander for the fire.

Exhausted firefighters fresh off the front lines described the devastation in some neighborhoods and the challenges of battling such a huge blaze.

“It looks like hell. I would imagine it felt like a nuclear bomb went off. There was fire everywhere. Everything had a square shape to it because it was foundations,” said Rich Rexach, who had been working 12-hour days since Tuesday, when flames swept through neighborhoods in this city of more than 400,000 people 60

miles south of Denver.

President Barack Obama toured the stricken areas Friday after issuing a disaster declaration for Colorado that frees up federal money. He thanked firefighters and other emergency workers, saying: “The country is grateful for your work. The country’s got your back.”

As residents waited anxiously to see what was left of their homes, police reported several burglaries in evacuated areas, along with break-ins of cars packed with evacuees’ possessions outside hotels.

Community leaders began notifying residents Thursday that their homes were destroyed. Lists of the heavily damaged



President Barack Obama tours the wildfire-devastated Mountain Shadows neighborhood in Colorado Springs, Colo., on Friday. CAROLYN KASTER/AP

streets were posted at a high school, and residents scanned the sheets, but for many, the notification was a formality. They had already recognized their streets on the aerial pictures that appeared in the news.

“The blanket that was on my bed when I grew up, a bunch of things my mother had made,” said Rick Spraycar, listing what he lost when his house in the hard-hit Mountain Shadows subdivision burned down. “It’s hard to put it into words. Everything I owned. Memories.”

For Ernie Storti, the pain of knowing that his was one of a handful of homes spared in his neigh-

borhood was hard.

“Our home was standing, and everything south of us was gone,” he said as tears streamed down his face outside a Red Cross shelter where he had met with insurance agents.

Authorities were still trying to figure out what caused the fire. They said conditions were too dangerous to allow them in to start their investigation.

More than 1,000 personnel and six helicopters were fighting the fire.

All eight Air Force firefighting planes from four states will be at Colorado Springs’ Peterson Air Force Base today and available to fight the fire, said Col. Jerry Champlin.

A feeling of helplessness, far from home

Tuesday is a day I’ll never forget. It passed without incident for most people in Des Moines, but for me, the whole world was shifting.

I moved to Des Moines about a month ago from Colorado Springs, Colo. And if moving so far away was hard, it was nothing compared to the helplessness I have felt this week as my hometown was, and continues to be, threatened by the Waldo Canyon fire.

Tuesday morning the fire only covered 5,000 acres and there were no injuries or deaths. I thought things were looking up, so I went to work and tried my hardest to stay focused. I ignored social media for the first time since the fire started on Saturday. At 4:30 p.m. my sister sent me a picture of the mountains from Colorado Springs. The sky was black with smoke and had an eerie orange glow. My heart dropped, but I tried to hope for the best.

Then I checked Twitter and the Colorado Springs news websites. To my dismay I saw that the fire had exploded. In a matter of 20 minutes it had jumped the last two ridges and containment lines between it and the city. Flames were traveling right toward the city’s west side.

I knew my parents and sister were safe because my childhood home is on the east side of the city. But I went to school on the west side, and I had friends and classmates who live in Mountain Shadows, the neighborhood right in the path of the fire. My aunt and her family live on the west side, too.

I left work in tears, not knowing what was going on and fearing the worst. I called my dad as I walked to the car, and he told me Mountain Shadows had been completely evacuated and the fire was getting closer and closer to the homes on the west side. I hung up with a feeling of worry, dread, hopelessness and heartbreak combined.

EMILY WYNN is a page designer for Gannett’s Design Studio in Des Moines who grew up in Colorado Springs, Colo.

“We were joined by hundreds of neighbors trying to head east on Woodmen Road, out of the fire’s pathway,” my aunt described in an email later. “With a convoy of three cars we drove east on Woodmen in the west-bound lanes. How strange. We were greeted by on-lookers all over the roadsides. It wasn’t until we turned by Woodmen Nissan that we realized that everyone was watching the explosion of fires all over the hills we just left.”

In 24 hours the fire tripled in size and destroyed hundreds of homes. The numbers that seemed so hopeful Tuesday morning were gone. The Waldo Canyon fire is now considered the most destructive fire in Colorado history, and my hometown was its victim.

The past few days have been hard for me to comprehend. From Des Moines, I can only read articles, follow social media and flip through the hundreds of photos online. I can’t volunteer, I can’t hug my family or my friends. I can’t even smell the smoke.

To me, it still seems unreal.

But then I log onto Facebook, and I see exactly how many people I know that have been affected by this tragedy. Nearly all of my high school classmates lived in Mountain Shadows, and many are among the 347 families who lost their homes. For every positive “my house is still there!” post I see, I also see pictures of homes reduced to ash.

But every day is getting better. I know the best firefighters in the country are in Colorado fighting the fires, and I know fires can’t burn forever. All I can do is hope for the best and be there for my friends and family—even from Iowa.

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