

Fire Update and Recap, Day 3, Wednesday Morning

by Kerana Todorov

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Fires continued to scorch thousands of acres in the Wine Country on Tuesday, as fire officials braced for winds to shift and gain strength, threatening thousands of homes and businesses.

As of Wednesday morning, multiple fires in Napa and Sonoma counties had burned nearly 100,000 acres in Napa and Sonoma counties. The had killed 13 people — 11 in Sonoma County and two in Napa, according to officials in Sonoma and Napa counties.

Multiple fires scorched 70,004 acres in south Napa and Sonoma counties, destroying more than 170 structures. The fire was 7 percent contained. More than 460 firefighters are on the scene, with more aid to come, according to Cal Fire.

Napa Fire officials are closely monitoring the fires immediately east and west of Napa as Cal Fire expect the fires to grow. More evacuations were anticipated.

“We are prepared to do any further evacuations,” Napa County Undersheriff Jean Donaldson said Wednesday morning.

Cal Fire officials braced for “exponential” fire growth Wednesday as firefighters were told to watch for increasing winds and low humidity.

“This is a very dynamic and rapidly changing incident,” said Cal Fire Incident Commander Kevin Lawson in Napa.

The Tubbs fire which roared north of Calistoga toward Santa Rosa, has scorched 28,000 acres, according to Cal Fire. A fire near Geyserville has burned another 1,800 acres, prompting evacuations. Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office said Wednesday said 670 were reported missing. Of those 110 have been found, Sheriff Rob Giordano said. Eleven people have been confirmed dead in Sonoma County. Wednesday’s evacuations included Juvenile Hall near Kenwood. The inmates were transported to Solano County, according to Sonoma County officials.

Signorello Estate off the Silverado Trail which burned in the Atlas Peak Fire. In Sonoma County, the Tubbs fire burned Paradise Ridge Winery near Santa Rosa.

At least four wineries in Napa County have either burned or have been partially destroyed in the fires; another nine members suffered damages to either their winery, vineyards or other buildings, according to the Napa Valley Vintners. The trade association did not disclose the names of the wineries.

Tom Muscatine, whose family Muscatine Vineyards on Soda Canyon Road, said the fire destroyed the main residence on the property. He is not sure how the 0.5-acre vineyard has fared. The grapes had not been picked, he said, adding he is worried about smoke taint.

Muscatine, who fled with his mother and 9-year-old daughter in the middle of Sunday night, is staying with family in San Francisco. He is not sure what he will do next. “We’re happy to be alive,” he said.

The number of affected wineries in Sonoma County is still unclear. Trade associations in Napa and Sonoma counties reported 90 percent of the fruit had been picked before the fires broke Sunday.

Karisa Kruse, president of the Sonoma County Winegrowers, on Wednesday said it was still too early to know the extent of the damage.

“We have not been able to get accurate updates from the Sonoma Valley since most of those areas are still under evacuation,” Kruse said in an email.

“Some vineyards have been affected, but what we know is that it is the cover crop that is burning in between the rows, not the vines themselves,” Kruse said. “Thankfully, we are about 90% harvested in the county and I heard that many growers are back harvesting today if they are in safe zones,” she said.

Treasury Wine Estates on Wednesday said that Stags’ Leap Winery and Cellar has not been affected. The company did not provide an update on Chateau St. Jean in Kenwood. News photo published Tuesday showed the main building standing.

“In regards to Chateau St. Jean, we have yet to be able to access the property and have no further updates at this stage,” the company said in a statement.

The Napa Valley Vintners said the top priority remains the safety and well-being of the community in the North Coast.

“Our hearts and condolences go out to the hundreds who have lost their homes, businesses and personal property. We are saddened by the news that there has been loss of life and pray that those numbers will remain small,” according to a statement issued Tuesday.

Michael Honig, board chair of the Napa Valley Vintners, said ‘It’s been a really tough couple of days.’

Honig praised the first responders as he spoke to a group of reporters at Honig Vineyard & Winery on Tuesday. “They’re doing an amazing job trying to protect our community,” he said.

The Napa Vintners have re-activated a community fund created after a 6.0-earthquake hit Napa in August 2014. The fund is set up to provide lodging and food to fire victims. The Napa Valley Community Disaster Relief Fund is managed through the Community Foundation of Napa Valley. Distributors and suppliers who want to help, Honig said.

Wineries have offered to help other vintners without power or lack of access. “It’s not like we’re the aerospace industry,” Peter Heitz, winemaker and viticulturist at Turnbull.

“We make bloody alcoholic beverages for a living, so it’s very collaborative,” he added.

“It’s really a tight-knit community. It’s a farming community that happens to make a luxury product. So it works like a farming community but it has the niceties of a pretty place that’s been damaged today but it will return,” he said.

The Napa Valley Vintners said 90 percent of the harvest was in before the fires.

Wineries without power resorted to old-fashioned winemaking, according to winemakers at Peju, Viader and Alpha Omega.

Peju’s director of winemaking, Sara Fowler, said employees came to work Monday. The tasting room had not intended to stay open but visitors stopped by and the winery opened its doors.

At Turnbull, about 100 visitors crashed Monday in the tasting room. They were given the company’s WiFi password so they could get in touch with relatives and friends, said Peter Heitz, winemaker and viticulturist at Turnbull.

“We didn’t intend to be open. But then when people came looking for a place to taste – it’s may be the trip of their lifetime to come to the Napa Valley or maybe they come every three months,” said Heitz, who was working with other employees on the crush pad Monday. “People arrived and you want to make them welcome,” he said.

Turnbull farms 150 planted vineyard acres at four locations, including 57 acres on a property in Calistoga where the Tubbs Fire roared through Sunday night. The grapes were picked before the fire broke. “The cover crop is burnt but the vines are fine,” Heitz said.

Trunks of oak trees are covered with blackened soot and the canopy leaves are a little dried out. But the trees will come back next spring, Heitz said. “It’s just kind of smoky.”

“We can’t totally assess the damage there, because there are trees that have fallen,” he also said. Heitz said he has about 20 tons left of cabernet Sauvignon to pick – or 5 percent left.

Alan Viader, director of operations and winemaking at Viader in Deer Park, helped evacuate residents with Napa County’s search and rescue team. He then went to work at his winery. Viader estimated Tuesday he has about 5 tons left to be picked in Coombsville. While he has not been able to reach the vineyard, he anticipates to pick the fruit in two to three weeks. Viader has another 15 tons to harvest in Deer Park – one bloc of cabernet sauvignon and another of cabernet franc. “They’re usually last,” he said.

Alpha Omega winemaker Jean Hoefliger, winemaker at Alpha Omega, said he has about 30 tons left to pick on Atlas Peak, Oakville and Mount Veeder, he said. He has been able to access the vineyards in Oakville and Mount Veeder. “Everything is good so far,” he said. He expects to pick in two weeks.

What’s surprising is the berries’ low pH. “We have across the board low pH,” he said.

The wine is fine, he stressed. It’s the people’s tragedy that’s the problem, he added in his native French.

On Tuesday, U.S. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, announced the Trump administration’s partial approval of federal disaster assistance to pay for the fires in Northern California. The funds are for emergency work, repairs, debris removal and replacement of facilities. The process is expected to take longer to help individuals and businesses. Thompson and U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, D- San Rafael appeared at a town hall at Santa Rosa High School Tuesday evening.

“We want you to know that your representatives in Congress are here for the long haul to do whatever it takes to make sure that you federal government has your back,” Huffman told the residents at the town hall meeting.