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NINA MOINI: Governor Tim Walz is extending the peacetime emergency for wildfires in and around the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness for 30 more days. The extension allows the state to continue assisting communities impacted by wildfires in Northern Minnesota.

As many as 17 fires continue burning in the region. Paddlers have been evacuating, some in dramatic fashion, from their campsites in the 1 million acre wilderness, covering it all for us is MPR's Dan Kraker. Thanks for being with us again, Dan.

DAN KRAKER: You're welcome, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Dan, you're in Ely. You have been for a couple of days. Describe what you're seeing now.

DAN KRAKER: Well, today it is just really, really smoky. So there have been these small pieces of ash falling from the sky all morning. You can't see the sun. It's trying to peek out a little bit now, but the air quality is very poor. There's just this ominous haze blanketing the whole area here from all these wildfires you mentioned that are burning in the region.

NINA MOINI: That's too bad. What is the latest on all those wildfires, Dan?

DAN KRAKER: Yeah, so I should say I'm at the Forest Service headquarters and we're going to be getting an update in about an hour. But here's what we know. So there are 17 fires burning, as you said. Many are kind of west, northwest of Ely, out along the Echo Trail, which is a road that runs from here to the Crane Lake area.

So yesterday, fire behavior was more moderate than Monday. But the fire still did grow. So there's two very large fires burning in the Boundary Waters up toward the Lac la Croix Iron Lake area. These huge lakes along the border with Canada. And there are some other fires burning along the Echo Trail there that I mentioned. And combined, Nina, all these fires have burned about 35,000 acres.

For context, that's about the size of the entire city of St Paul, around 55 square miles.

NINA MOINI: Thanks for that perspective. What about the fire burning closer to Ely there? Are areas still under evacuation?

DAN KRAKER: Yeah so the Camp fire is that fire that's of most concern here in Ely. It's the fire that on Monday jumped containment lines and made a pretty big run toward Basswood Lake and the Boundary Waters and forced some rescues there. Fire growth was more moderate yesterday. But a big evacuation order remains in place because of that fire. And that includes an area along the Fernberg corridor here outside Ely, where there are a lot of homes, and camps, and resorts.

And there have also been some new evacuation orders issued today for areas along the Echo Trail west of Ely because of growth of some of the fires I mentioned previously.

NINA MOINI: What about the other side of the Boundary Waters over off Gunflint Trail outside Grand Marais area? There were some pretty dramatic pictures posted on social media, Dan, last night of just a very orange, smoky sky.

DAN KRAKER: Yeah, it was just surreal pictures that we saw. So there's one large fire that is burning on the Canadian side of the border in Quetico Provincial Park, and that fire has now spread down across the border into the Boundary Waters, around an area of the south arm of Knife Lake.

And actually, those fires in Canada, Nina, have endangered some YMCA campers from Minnesota. Here's Governor Tim Walz during a news conference this morning.

TIM WALZ: We have two groups of YMCA campers that were north of the border, in remote areas where the fires are burning pretty heavily. Premier Ford said it looks like nighttime in Toronto this morning, the smoke was so heavy. But I am pleased to report that the first group will be out in the next hour. They have been spotted and the Canadian Air Force is assisting in the extraction.

The second group of campers is on a sandbar in the middle, and they are safe at this time. It's going to take a little more because they're remote, to get to them.

DAN KRAKER: And later on, Nina, officials did say that second group should be out today.

NINA MOINI: OK, Dan, I know fires are a natural part of the ecosystem in Northern Minnesota, but this is awful to watch. Is this pretty unusual now what's happening?

DAN KRAKER: It is, Nina. As you said, this is a fire adapted landscape up here. The forest does need fire to stay healthy, to help regenerate, to help thin out underbrush. But it is very unusual to have this many fires of this magnitude burning this early in the summer. Usually, when we get these big fires in the Boundary Waters, they occur before spring green-up, or in the early fall when things can get really dry.

Here's DNR forestry director Patty Thielen talking about this from that same news conference.

PATTY THIELEN: This is not the most fires we've ever had at one time. This is an unusual event for July and an unusual way for fires to start. Most fires in Minnesota are started by humans, by people, over 90%. These fires, we think, were all caused by lightning.

NINA MOINI: And Dan, it's also really hot still. How are the conditions? How are fire crews doing?

DAN KRAKER: Yeah so conditions, it's still warm but conditions have improved today. Winds are lighter and it is cooler, about 10 degrees cooler in Ely, even cooler over on the Gunflint side. But it's still very dry, still very warm. Fire officials are still concerned about how fast these fires have moved, the amount of energy that they've just built up, and the amount of fuel that is still out there in the forest for them to burn.

Here's DNR commissioner Sarah Strommen.

SARAH STROMMEN: We expect to be at these fires for quite some time. We are not seeing relief in the weather, unfortunately. And we are dry across the state. So we're going to continue to focus the resources in the Northeast. Again, focus on protecting life and property. That is first and foremost.

NINA MOINI: What else are you hearing, Dan, about the firefighting efforts and what all that looks like?

DAN KRAKER: Yeah, it's definitely an all-hands-on-deck kind of situation. The Forest Service brought in a federal incident management team today to take over management of the fires here near Ely, and I heard this morning they've ordered another team to manage the fires on the other side of the wilderness at the end of the Gunflint Trail with that fire that I talked about that's coming down, that came down from Canada.

So at last word, I heard there were about 300 firefighters. But I have to say there must be more than that by now, because crews have been coming in from out West, from nearby fire departments, working to protect structures. There are, of course, lots of aircraft battling the fires from above, dropping water to slow them down. So a lot of effort here being put out to put out these fires.

NINA MOINI: And, Dan, the Forest Service closed down the entire Boundary Waters earlier this week because of the fire, as you know. And I'm sure we'll learn more about this as time passes. But are you starting to get a sense for the economic impact of that closure?

DAN KRAKER: Yeah, I'm going to be talking to some outfitters later today, but it's a big impact. The Forest Service evacuated thousands of paddlers from the wilderness this week. Outfitters have been swamped trying to reschedule those trips. But it's tough because we don't even yet when the Boundary Waters is going to reopen. And some areas could open before others. There are also lots of camps and resorts that have been evacuated.

Ely's big blueberry festival is coming up in a week and a half. But I should say there are lots of resorts still open. Over on the Gunflint side, resorts have been stressing, they're open for business. Many are located on lakes that are not in the wilderness or parts of them that aren't in the BWCA, so folks can still get out in the water. There are also canoe routes outside the BWCA that do offer a similar experience.

But of course, folks should continue to check on the air quality before making trips to these areas.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, people are going to be impacted in different ways, but what is your sense for the general mood from just people you've talked to so far?

DAN KRAKER: Yeah, I mean, there's still a lot of fear up here and uncertainty about the fires and what they could do. It's also an emotional time, Nina. People's homes and businesses are at risk. And there's several parts of the Boundary Waters that are on fire. And fire, as we've talked about, is a natural, important part of the ecosystem. But for those of us who love this place, who revere these canoe trips in this wilderness, this landscape is going to be changed in our lifetimes.

NINA MOINI: Thanks so much for your reporting, Dan. Stay safe.

DAN KRAKER: Thanks. You're welcome.

NINA MOINI: That's reporter Dan Kraker in Ely for us. Coming up later in the hour, we'll get the latest on air quality from MPR Chief Meteorologist, Ben Cathey. And as Dan mentioned, at 1 o'clock, there's going to be a press conference from the US Forest Service giving the latest on the wildfires. We're going to carry that live on the air for you as soon as it begins and on mprnews.org. Like we mentioned, people are evacuating the Boundary Waters Canoe Area due to these wildfires.

Camps are canceling events and trails have closed to keep people safe. But with so many people leaving, businesses and the affected areas are wondering how long it will take to get customers back. Businesses like Ely Outdoors Company are seeing firsthand how these wildfires will impact the summer season. Here to tell us more about what he's seeing is Ely Outdoors Company owner Ryan Kari. Thanks for being with us, Ryan.

RYAN KARI: Hi, Nina. Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: Can you tell us a bit about what you're seeing there in the Ely area and how you're dealing with the smoke?

RYAN KARI: Well, like Dan mentioned, hazy, basically looks overcast, but that's probably the smoke above us. There's a little bit of a breeze, but it's mainly a northerly wind. So most of it's blowing into town here. So it's kind of smoky.

NINA MOINI: So your company outfits people with gear, offers guide services in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. How have you been working with people to have trips planned?

RYAN KARI: Well, it's difficult. Like you already previously mentioned, we don't really know when it's going to open. It's hard to tell. So you're in limbo on what you want to do. In the short term, we're just telling people to just hang tight and see what happens. In the long term, like in August, we're basically just telling people, just hang tight and let's see what happens here these next few days, or this next week, and then go from there.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, you just have to wait and see in a way, right? But did you have to coordinate any evacuations or anything like that with any of your customers?

RYAN KARI: Well, we had to basically try to get our groups out, and the best you can do is send them a text message. Hopefully they maybe have service and they got the text message to come out, but then you're not really sure when that group is going to come out to pick them up. So yesterday and the day before, we were waiting to get information from groups or text messages from groups or calls saying, hey, we're here. Can you come get us. And so finally, yesterday afternoon, I was able to get my last group out and that felt good to have all my groups out.

And I've talked to a few other outfitters, and talked to one this morning and he mentioned that they finally got word on their last group and they were going to have them out this morning.

NINA MOINI: Good. Safety is obviously number one. It feels almost strange to talk about any sort of economic impact this early on. But this is really a critical time to a lot of businesses and the economy in the area. And I just wonder if you're starting to think about, you mentioned August and a little bit further out, if you're starting to think about how this may affect your business and others in the area.

RYAN KARI: Well, correct. So in the last couple days we've been focused on getting people out, making sure everybody's safe.

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

RYAN KARI: And now we've been taking lots of phone calls and questions about what's going to happen in the future here, what's going to happen in the next couple of weeks, and we really obviously don't have an answer here. But yeah, you do start turning to how long is this going to be closed for. What are we looking at here in the future? So you've got to obviously take everything day by day at this point because a lot can change.

Minnesota weather up here can change rather quickly, which we're kind of hoping for. And so the weekend's showing chances of rain, right? So we're kind of hoping that does result in getting some moisture on the ground and at least helping reduce or slow down these fires.

NINA MOINI: All right, Ryan, we hope you'll check back in with us over the coming weeks and months and just let us how things are going. And please continue to stay safe, OK?

RYAN KARI: Yep. Thank you I appreciate it.

NINA MOINI: All right. Thanks so much. Ely Outdoors Company owner, Ryan Kari.