

NINA MOINI: Wildfires in northeast Minnesota have firefighters and volunteers rushing to the Boundary Waters, but it also has people avoiding and canceling trips to the region, as well. This is a big problem for the large tourism industry in Cook County, Minnesota. Their North Shore destinations like Grand Marais and recreation destinations like the Gunflint Trail attract people from all over the country. The county, farther East of the fires, is urging people to still visit the region.

Here to tell us more about the effort to bring tourists to northern Minnesota and the wildfires' impact on the region's tourism industry is Executive Director at Visit Cook County and the Cook County Chamber of Commerce, Linda Jurek. Thanks for being with us, Linda.

LINDA JUREK: Thank you for having me, Nina.

NINA MOINI: I'm so sorry that all of this is happening and for the ways that it's impacting so many people. I want to ask first, if you could just reinforce to folks, who don't know or maybe aren't familiar with the area, just how important tourism is to Cook County, there.

LINDA JUREK: It would be 80% of our annual economy. Very dependent on tourism. We have just over 1.2 million visitors throughout the year so very much-- very important to keeping the wheels on our bus.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Can you give us an idea of how people are canceling or how many cancellations you're seeing, and how far out people appear to be canceling?

LINDA JUREK: With the closure of the Boundary Waters, we become a stopping zone. Grand Marais being its cute harbor village. We're at the border of Canada so we get our international travelers, as well. So the closure of the Boundary Waters, unless you're really looking at the ticketed, we can't predict how many people stop within our small communities and stay as they enter the Boundary Waters and/or exit. So that has been very impactful.

The smoke of last week was also very impactful. And also the Midwest and national coverage that we received on that smoke had people really starting to cancel and cancel way out into the future. And as we all know, fire, and fire smoke, and fire danger changes almost daily.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. What have you been hearing from local business owners, resorts about how this is already impacting them?

LINDA JUREK: I had a meeting this morning, and I talked to a number of business owners, including our city administrator. They operate a municipal liquor store. So when you think of July 4 weekend being the best-ever weekend on record compared to last midweek of July compared to this weekend, which was the quietest ever on record.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

LINDA JUREK: And that was our rec park and also with the liquor store. I mean, it was everything just dropped off. And yet, at the same time, no smoke, no ash, looked like a beautiful, absolute gorgeous day in Grand Marais. And the North Shore.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And there are some parts, I understand, of Cook County that are under evacuation orders. What is going on in those areas?

LINDA JUREK: We're in the set zone. When you get to the end of the Gunflint Trail, which is a Scenic Byway for those that haven't visited here, we often say the Gunflint Trail, but you're not really hiking. You're not putting on your hiking boots and hiking a trail. It is a paved Scenic Byway. So at the end of the Gunflint Trail, they are in the set stage. And that is all due to the Little Knife Fire. So the Little Knife Fire crossed over from the Quetico and Canada. When you think of that, that started with a lightning strike.

So on the northern side of our border, close to 64,000 acres have burned. And then on our side of the border, just under 5,000 acres have burned. And I attended a meeting this morning. The difficulty of this fire is that it's jumping through islands. It's like a mosaic fire. It's not like a grass fire that starts out and burns across a field. It's moving from island to island, waterway to waterway so that makes it a little bit more difficult to battle.

That said, it's an hour and 15 minutes to the end of the Gunflint Trail, call it an hour and 20-minute drive. We're miles away from that fire, along the North Shore of Lake Superior.

NINA MOINI: And just so people know, it goes ready, set, go. So people are in the set categories, what you're saying, which basically just means have a plan, right? Have your important papers together, have everything ready so that you're not just starting to think about a plan were things to change.

LINDA JUREK: That is absolutely, correct, Nina. It's not like, oh, my goodness, pace by the window--

NINA MOINI: Right.

LINDA JUREK: --and run out. It means just like, set yourself up. Make sure you're ready to move out if that fire switches. And that was one of the concerns early on with the Little Knife. They thought maybe with earlier predictions of wind that there would be, what they call, it would take a run today. We're not seeing that happen at all. It's actually less active than they thought it would be.

And like I said, we have a federal organization, NIMO, on the ground here, and they are the folks that are specializing in watching the actual-- they don't mitigate fires as much as they measure fires.

NINA MOINI: It's such a tough balance, because having tuned in to all of these Forest Service news conferences that they've been doing, we are hearing words like "unprecedented." And we are hearing just about how difficult it is going to be to get to some of these remote fires. And the meteorologists have been saying, listen, it might take snow for this to really stop. So it has been incredibly challenging.

And while we never want to make people too scared to go anywhere, we want to get the information out. So it's just such a tough balance. And with the fires expected to continue to burn, like I mentioned, through the fall, what's your plan? Are you all thinking of a plan to try-- beyond just asking people please come, please don't cancel your trips, what else can you do?

LINDA JUREK: It's really twofold for me, as I wear both the chamber hat, really driving and being that voice for business. And then I also drive the destination marketing organization of Visit Cook County. So it actually works well with our economy, sometimes, the way it is based on tourism, because we're very understanding and compassionate to our businesses, which is why I'm telling people right now. Goodness sakes, our marketing team here is working on letting folks that the North Shore of Lake Superior is absolutely still an amazing travel destination, where the fire and the closures and that impact really occurred because it's in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

And it's remote, and we certainly don't want to put people at risk, but nobody's at risk down here along the shore of Lake Superior. And I would just encourage folks out there, if they're questioning what it's like here, to go to Visit Cook County and look at, we have six different webcams placed throughout the northeast region, and two are up the Gunflint, two are downtown Grand Marais. We have one out in Lutsen. So you're going to see an actual real time, what is happening here.

NINA MOINI: That's good to know.

LINDA JUREK: Yeah, we're hoping people will really take a look at that. Because it's a cloudy day, it's been raining a little bit here today, but it's an absolutely, lovely morning. Absolutely gorgeous. Our air quality right now is good. So if you look at an air quality app of any sort, you're going to see this whole Northeastern region with really good air quality.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Linda, just lastly, there has already been talk about getting any type of financial assistance or assistance from the federal government to some of the businesses impacted, like in Ely, again, to the West of where you all are. What about your businesses, or have there been any talks about financial resources for any small businesses that may suffer just from this fire and then all the talk around it?

LINDA JUREK: Oh, Nina, you have a mind meld going with me. I was on the phone yesterday with Senator Hauschild. He will be making a visit here. We are definitely on target with that, with our Small Business Development Center, as well as with the county.

The folks that are really, really hurting the most right now are all of our outfitters. This is their bread and butter month of July and August. And because of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area closure, they are like, stuck. So we're encouraging people to get online, do some online shopping. Don't cancel your trip for September, wait to see what happens, because this fire can be so changing, and we could be in a whole different situation next week here on the Eastern side of the Boundary Waters.

So, that's who's really impacted right now as far as cut off all financial stream. And then the flip side of that coin is still come and visit us. Because all along the shore of Lake Superior and in Lutsen and Tofte and Grand Marais and Grand Portage, it's still a lovely destination.

NINA MOINI: Linda, thank you so much. Wishing you all the best.

LINDA JUREK: Exactly.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, wishing you all the best up there. Thank you so much for your time. Take care.

LINDA JUREK: All right. Thank you, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Bye, bye. Linda Jurek is the Executive Director at Visit Cook County and the Cook County Chamber of Commerce.