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NINA MOINI: The US Forest Service has announced it's closing the entire Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness after about 20 wildfires ignited around Superior National Forest and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area over the weekend. Governor Tim Walz has called on the National Guard to help. The fires are in remote areas, though some residents of St. Louis County were notified last night that they should be prepared to evacuate.

Ginny Nelson is an owner of outfitter for BWCA canoers called Spirit of the Wilderness in Ely. She's been busy this morning notifying her customers about the closure.

GINNY NELSON: We've been calling people this morning trying to notify them about their trips so that they either don't drive up too early for a trip that's not happening, or we can hopefully try to rebook the trip. And many of the groups we've been able to rebook the trip for a later date.

Currently, there's a number of people that are out in the Boundary Waters that are customers, so I have a number of groups exiting today anyways, so we won't notify them ahead of time. We'll just let them exit as they were planned, and then others that are in there for a longer duration will allow the Forest Service to go in and make contact with them because there's very little cell reception in some cases, or people have their phones off. But we definitely are very aware of where everybody is.

It puts a little bit of a strain on us for sure, but we have-- we've been on the phone for at least the last hour and a half, and I was emailing people last night. So it's definitely changes our course of action for the day.

NINA MOINI: That was Ginny Nelson, the owner of a canoeing outfitter in Ely. Now for an update on the fires and how they're being fought, we're turning to Karen Harrison, a wildfire prevention specialist with the Department of Natural Resources. Thanks for being with us, Karen.

KAREN HARRISON: Thanks so much for having me.

NINA MOINI: So the entire BWCA closed by the Forest Service. Why was it important to make that decision and how big of a deal is that?

KAREN HARRISON: Yeah. I mean, I think, number one, as people working in wildland fire, our number one priority is always public safety and firefighter safety. And so when we're having the kind of weather conditions that we're seeing right now, that's going to continue into tomorrow. We know that there's been some heavy activity in a couple of these wildfires. And really important to make sure that people are safe.

And so there's always a lot of discussions and decision making that goes into those because it impacts a lot of people. I can't talk specifics on that because I'm not a part of the National-- or the Superior National Forest. But I do know it's not something taken lightly.

NINA MOINI: Sure, yeah. No, of course. And things are shifting all the time with fires. And as of now, could you give us an idea of how many fires are burning around Superior National Forest and the BWCA?

KAREN HARRISON: Yep. So across that Northeastern part of Minnesota, there are currently 16 active wildfires. And that number has been shifting quite a bit. And there have been some that have been able to be completely contained, which is great. There are some that are very slow moving, just like smoldering, kind of staying in its area. Others have had-- yesterday afternoon saw some heightened activity with that increase in wind and high temperatures in the afternoon.

So there's definitely a difference between across the area. But like you mentioned, most of these are in very remote areas, and so they're hard to access. And so that's some of what our crews are doing, is making sure that they can get access into the areas so that they can fight the fires.

NINA MOINI: Tell us a little more about that, if you would, when you're talking about these remote areas, how do they gain access? How does that process work?

KAREN HARRISON: It's going to be different depending on where the wildfire is. So I within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, they use very minimum strategies and tactics. They don't want to make an impact on the wilderness. There's currently three wildfires within the BWCAW, and they're using a lot of aerial aircraft, walking in, canoeing.

In the other wildfires, outside of that, we're working with dozers and other heavy equipment to get access to those sites. So it kind of depends on which fire it is, but working to use equipment to get access that provides some safety measures for our firefighters that are going to be in there as well.

NINA MOINI: Sure. Tell us a little bit more about just these conditions that are being experienced in these parts of the state and across the state, and how that impacts the work and the condition of these fires.

KAREN HARRISON: Yeah. So we are in red flag conditions, which is, I think, pretty unusual for July, seeing these very high temperatures with the humidity dropping to 20%, 30% in the afternoons, and then that wind gusts being so high. Those are all factors. But on top of that, we have drought levels. This area of Minnesota hasn't received as much precipitation as others have in the last few weeks. And so it's dry.

Even though it's green, there's still some dry vegetation. And when you have a fire that's active, once that wind and humidity combined with that high temperature, you have an increase for fire behavior. And that fire danger and risk just increases to be pretty critical.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Just kind of a lot of things happening at once that are unhelpful, it seems. When there's a situation like this, can you tell us about who is fighting these fires? Are there folks coming-- crews coming from other places? Is it at that point yet? We know the National Guard is helping out. What can you tell us about how all of this happens?

KAREN HARRISON: Yeah, in Minnesota, we have the Minnesota Interagency Command System at state and federal agencies that work together to plan, coordinate, and suppress wildfire activities. So we have a really great system that works to be able to increase the opportunities for us to order resources and get people where they need to be.

Right now, there is-- the acronym for that is MNICS. So we have a MNICS Type 3 team managing 10 of those wildfires. The Superior National Forest is managing the other six active wildfires. And we do have engines and staff in from out of state helping to support this suppression and management of these fires and order additional resources as needed.

NINA MOINI: We heard that some residents in the St. Louis County area may be having to evacuate, or they're sort of on alert that might need to happen. Do you have any insight as to how likely that is that people will need to evacuate, even though the fires have been in remote areas?

KAREN HARRISON: Yeah. So St. Louis County put in their ready set, go notifications. So there are three different areas that have ready and set notifications. So getting ready means people are packing their bag and creating a plan to leave. And set means they should be ready to go at a moment's notice. So some areas around certain fires-- so three different areas-- have those in place currently.

And whether the go is activated depends on meeting certain criteria. And those are constantly evaluated as things change, as the fire activity picks up and grows. There are certain points that they're looking at to when that should go.

NINA MOINI: I feel like before the summer really got going, we heard that we might have really smoky skies across the state for a big portion of the summer. We know that fires burning in Canada and along the border can impact other places and across the state. Do you know if smoky skies are coming from these fires and how wide the spread?

KAREN HARRISON: I haven't heard any updates from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, which typically issues those air quality alerts related to smoke. It could definitely be an impact. Yesterday, we saw some pretty big smoke plumes from the thumb fire in the BWCAW. And so when the wind picks up, it depends on where that smoke moves and how far up into the atmosphere it goes. There are wildfires happening in Ontario, in Quetico.

And so that definitely could be something. I haven't heard any updates currently about if there's predictions for that yet. So hopefully not. But it could be an impact.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Karen, a lot of people wonder when something like this happens or when there are multiple fires going at once. Like, was this natural? Was this a man-made fire? And sometimes it can take a long time to discover that. And you're probably just focused on fighting the fires right now. But what do you know in terms of cause?

KAREN HARRISON: Yeah. So in early July, there was a storm system that moved through the area. It didn't bring a lot of precipitation, unfortunately, but it did bring a lot of lightning. And so a lot of these wildfires we do were started by lightning. There are still a few that are undetermined, and those are still being looked into.

NINA MOINI: All right Karen, we really appreciate the update. Thank you.

KAREN HARRISON: Thanks so much for having me.

NINA MOINI: That was Karen Harrison, a wildfire prevention specialist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.