

[THEME MUSIC]

NINA MOINI: Well, wildfire smoke is nearly inescapable across most of Minnesota today. Fires burning on the northern edge of the state and in Canada have filled the air with particles not only down to the Twin Cities, but as far as Detroit and Toronto. Northern Minnesota has broken previous records for poor air quality by a long shot.

In a moment, we'll talk with our Clay Masters, in Ely. The town is a gateway to the Boundary Waters Canoe area, which paddlers and outfitters have been evacuating due to the fires. First, *MPR* Chief Meteorologist Ben Cathey is here with me in the studio, with more details on your weather and air quality conditions, and what we can expect over the next few days. Thanks for being with us, Ben.

BEN CATHEY: Hey, thanks for having me, Nina.

NINA MOINI: A busy time for you. We appreciate it. Just how bad is the air quality across the state today?

BEN CATHEY: Yeah, absolutely. Virginia, Minnesota, which is near Hibbing, just absolutely demolished another state record. I keep thinking, OK, it can't go higher. So for example, 500 is the top of the scale, and so it doesn't get higher than that, theoretically, but it was at 1,400, almost three times the top of the scale. Someone told me yesterday in a text, "It's bad, and it ain't ever been this bad." That's probably the best summary for your listeners, Ben.

The good news, though, I was just mentioning, is that from southwest towards the northeast, we're seeing better, not perfect, but better, numbers hour after hour, from Fargo to Brainerd. It's starting to get into the Twin Cities, it'll start to push out.

NINA MOINI: So, do you feel like you know how long this will last, the smoky air? It's hard to know, right?

BEN CATHEY: It is hard to know. There is really good computer data now that we have not had just as recent as three to four years ago. So it does show an improvement for later today. And I'm not a firefighter, but the firefighters themselves are saying, hey, we may not be able to get these totally out until after the first snow, and so there may be times through the late summer into the fall, where things pop back up, and we could have recurrences of rough air quality. But it does look like there'll be a big improvement for a lot of the state later today, and then for a lot of the rest of the state by the end of the weekend.

NINA MOINI: OK, good to know. I understand there's also some rain possible in the forecast. Is that helpful?

BEN CATHEY: For sure. Yeah, that'll definitely wash. It's like a bath for a lot of the smoke.

So there's a couple of showers near Brainerd right now. That's helpful because the air quality is still pretty bad in Brainerd. And then some showers moving through the far northwestern parts of Minnesota right now, near Thief River Falls. Those are moving towards International Falls. And then through this evening, some light, gentle rain, which is great. We need that. That also helps the fire behavior and what we call crowding, which is you get these embers in the canopy, and that's really dangerous for firefighters and for the fires.

Then around 6:00 to 7:00 AM, when the fire activity is at its lowest, typically, in general, we will see some showers move through that could be a little heavier, and that's also great news. But there may be a little bit of lightning so that would not be great.

NINA MOINI: Right, because lightning was suspected to have caused some of these wildfires in the first place. Tell us a bit about what folks can do to keep their air quality in their homes maybe as safe as they can. Smoke seems to be really leaking into a lot of workplaces, homes. It's basically unavoidable for a lot of us.

BEN CATHEY: I woke up this morning for our teams meeting and I started talking, and I was like, oh, the smoke got me. I'm sure you can hear it, too. So if you're like me and a lot of Minnesotans, where there wasn't necessarily central AC in your house and you have window units, it's pulling that smoke in. And one of our reporters, Dana, said her smoke detector in her hotel room last night went off because it was pulling so much smoke in.

So if you don't have a HEPA filter, those masks, the KN95 masks are great. Those are selling out, but you can build something called a Corsi-Rosenthal box. It's much simpler than it sounds. You get four really high-quality air filters, like you would put in your vent at home, you duct tape the heck out of them, and then you get one of those cheap box fans and you tape that, and so it makes a cube, and face it where it'll pull the air through that. And for under \$40, you can have this amazing solution to help clear the smoke out. It's not perfect, but it is a really good option.

NINA MOINI: All right. Well, if folks are looking for that, that's a good tip. Thanks so much, Ben Cathy. We appreciate it.

BEN CATHEY: Thank you, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Ben Cathy is MPR's Chief Meteorologist. And as Ben mentioned, the worst air quality is for those closest to the wildfires. That's where MPR News host Clay Masters is, in Ely. Thanks for being with us, Clay.

CLAY MASTERS: Yeah, happy to be here, Nina.

NINA MOINI: You got up to Ely this morning. Set the scene for us. What is it like? Are people out and about at all or mostly inside?

CLAY MASTERS: Yeah, I mean, I'm standing on Main Street right now in Ely, and it's definitely not a ghost town. There are still cars going up and down the main boulevard. There are people out right now. I'm standing outside of an outfitter, where canoes are stacked up. So there's still some business happening.

A lot of what the outfitters are doing right now is just dealing with the influx of people. They've gotten them off the waters, off the Boundary Waters. Right now, they're talking with the people who had trips planned and having to do cancellations or figure out how to refund their money. So, I mean, there's definitely still a bustle about Ely, but the haze is very thick. And every once in a while, I'm seeing a little specks of what look like ash in the air.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, what are people doing to stay safe? Do they seem to have a lot of masks?

CLAY MASTERS: I've seen a few masks. I mean, it's recommended people stay inside. People have been looking to get air filters and masks so they're not breathing in this horrible air, whether they're outside or inside. We have a team up here in Ely. My colleague, Estelle Timar-Wilcox talked to Steve Holthaus, who went into a hardware store for masks, and he said he's never experienced smoke like this.

STEVE HOLTHAUS: Many Canadian wildfires and you thought that was bad, but it's nothing compared to what this is now. So, I just hope the wind switches directions at some point. But, I mean, the town's safe, and we're thankful for that. And if it's putting up with some smoke for a while, then that's all you can do.

CLAY MASTERS: And he says he went to the grocery store, too. And it was filled with haze coming in through the doors. I should say, I am wearing in N95 right now.

NINA MOINI: Good, good. Stay safe out there, definitely. What's the latest on these wildfires, though? Everything seems to be moving fast.

CLAY MASTERS: Yeah, I mean, as you've heard from officials this week, these fires are very dramatic. New ones are popping up that are small, some merged together into one fire. Currently, the forest has 15 active wildfires and three active fires inside the BW. The biggest fires are in the Boundary Waters. The Thumb Fire is more than 14,000 acres, and the Bear Trap Fire is at 13,500 acres.

Now, Saint Louis County Sheriff Gordon Ramsay says that fire has moved closer to populated areas now.

GORDON RAMSAY: And the Echo Trail is a little bit of a benchmark for us on level of concern. When it gets to that point or crosses the Echo Trail, you get into a lot more resorts, seasonal homes, some year-round homes. And so that, for me, is an area that we're really watching closely.

Fortunately, the winds switched today, so it had been blowing southerly, which pushed that South. Now, the winds are going to be blowing North again, so it gives a little reprieve. Now, that's not to say these fires still don't move opposite of the wind direction, especially given all the fuels.

CLAY MASTERS: And then outside the Boundary Waters, we have the Campfire, which is the closest to Ely. That's at more than 2,000 acres. And then the Sioux Fire, Nina, that's northwest of Ely, and is estimated at over 7,000 acres.

NINA MOINI: What are you hearing about evacuations, Clay?

CLAY MASTERS: Yeah, officials believe most people have been evacuated from the Boundary Waters. Evacuation zones are constantly fluctuating. There are evacuations in place in part of Saint Louis County and Lake County, and then some places are evacuating even without an order. As we've heard from Hannah Yang a moment ago, several summer camps have evacuated.

NINA MOINI: Thanks for keeping an eye on this for us, Clay.

CLAY MASTERS: Yeah, you're welcome.

NINA MOINI: Host Clay Masters in Ely for us. He'll have more from Ely on *All Things Considered* this afternoon, starting at 3:00.

Thousands of canoeists, as you heard, were evacuated from the Boundary Waters after the Forest Service closed the wilderness area this week. State and federal officials warned that these fires will likely burn for weeks, if not months, and the tourism that part of the region relies upon is already taking a big hit from the fires. Dan Kraker reports from Ely on the impact on wilderness outfitters.

DAN KRAKER: There's a giant map of the Boundary Waters behind the front desk at Ely Outfitting Company. It shows lakes and portages and campsites, and staff here have also drawn in all the different wildfires burning across the wilderness.

This week, owner Jason Zaborkrtsky also puts sticky notes showing where 75% of his customers were when the Boundary Waters was closed. Yesterday, he was finally able to peel off that last sticky note.

JASON So we got everybody out of the wilderness, which is a real relief.

ZABORTKRTSKY:

DAN KRAKER: On Monday, some of his customers were forced to leave six of his canoes behind to evacuate in front of the raging campfire. But he hasn't had much time to think about the impacts of the fires and the Boundary Waters' closure on his business.

JASON I haven't really thought about that, actually. Our sole focus was getting these people to safety.

ZABORTKRTSKY:

DAN KRAKER: But reality is starting to sink in. He holds up a folder full of bookings through the rest of the summer.

JASON And now, we're starting to process all of our cancellations.

ZABORTKRTSKY:

DAN KRAKER: Some are rescheduling trips, but he says dozens and dozens of customers have canceled. And that's especially tough on a seasonal business that makes almost all its money in just a few months. Zaborkrtsky says he doesn't even pay all his bills until later in the summer.

JASON I'll try to remain optimistic, but a closure that starts in the first half of July is realistically, economically

ZABORTKRTSKY: devastating for seasonal businesses if it goes on for an extended period of time.

DAN KRAKER: Farther down Ely's main drag, it's a similar story for Ginny Nelson at Spirit of the Wilderness Canoe Outfitters. She's worked 17-hour days, helping to evacuate her customers. She's just now turning to the stack of cancellations.

GINNY NELSON: No, I have no idea what the actual monetary impact is or any of that, because safety was our first concern. So I didn't even-- I haven't even looked at that or actually, I don't really want to.

DAN KRAKER: Nelson employs 20 people. She's trying to keep them busy cleaning windows and doing the work they usually do in the fall. Normally, they'd be running around packing trips and driving canoeists to the water.

GINNY NELSON: This is our money-making season. Yeah, this is when we make our money. We don't make money in the winter, other than maybe some deposits that come through. This is our livelihood. This is our peak season. And we're hoping that maybe the Boundary Waters opens up soon so we can get back at it.

DAN KRAKER: That uncertainty is tough. The Forest Service has extended the wilderness closure through at least Saturday, but Nelson stresses that Ely is still open. The city's big blueberry festival is still scheduled for later this month. There are lots of resorts and other businesses not in the evacuated area.

Gunflint Lodge owner John Fredrikson says that's also the case on the other side of the Boundary Waters, along the Gunflint Trail. Business is down, he says, but there are still people staying at the lodge and boating on lakes not in the wilderness.

JOHN FREDRIKSON: Some people really enjoy kind of seeing the activity here with what's going on and the sky changing colors and kind of unique historic situation that we have up here right now.

DAN KRAKER: But the fires burning across the region, have created dangerous air quality. On Tuesday, it was some of the worst in the entire country. That's raised concerns about the health of not just tourists, but of workers in the region. Evacuation zones are also constantly fluctuating. Just last night, the Forest Service closed the campground at the end of the Gunflint Trail. But outfitters and others are holding out hope that rains will come, the wilderness will reopen, and tourists will return.

Dan Kraker, NPR News, Ely.