MPR News | Minnesota Now Study estimates $9 million economic loss due to BWCA wildfires, parts of region have recovered 01M5WN6TDXDENZZVQHWRBAX7MB

NINA MOINI: A new study is giving us a first look at the economic impact of the wildfires this summer in the Boundary Waters. Researchers at the University of Minnesota Duluth looked at Ely and Grand Marais. And in July alone estimated an economic loss of $9 million. Joining me now to see how recovery is going is Linda Jurek, executive director at Visit Cook County and the Cook County Chamber of Commerce. That's where Grand Marais is located along the North Shore there. Thanks so much for joining the program again, Linda. It's good to talk with you.

LINDA JUREK: Yeah, my pleasure.

NINA MOINI: And we're also thrilled to be joined by one of the researchers at UMD, Michael Vasichek. Thanks for being with us, Michael.

MICHAEL VASICHEK: Hi, thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: Sometimes a massive event will happen and it's like three, five years later people are studying what's happening. It's nice to hear that you all were able to dive in on this right away to try to assess what was going on. Michael, can you tell us a little bit about the study and how you were able to calculate the economic loss?

MICHAEL VASICHEK: Yeah, so I was really excited to be able to get this data out as quick as we were able to. Using mobile cell phone data, we were able to track how many visitors come to the regions of Ely and Grand Marais, and comparing that to previous summers, we were able to look at the loss in visitors in July while the Boundary Waters were closed.

And then we have some surveys that we've conducted in the past that estimate visitor spending, like when they're a tourist in an area, they'll spend money on lodging and restaurants and recreation. And so using the estimated loss in visitors and how much they would have spent, we can then model the total economic impact from this event.

NINA MOINI: Michael, were you surprised, concerned? This figure is kind of hard for people to wrap their heads around-- this 9 million. I mean, Linda, maybe you could speak to what that means to you. What does that figure say to you?

LINDA JUREK: Well, I would have to add that whenever you're doing a sampling, you have to remember that it is a sampling when you're using cellular device data. And I would also want to note that we actually did a economic impact study of tourism a couple years ago, and we did that with the university and their tourism branch.

So at that point in time, we were able to identify that the economy in Cook County, Minnesota, is about 81% dependent on our visitors of the tourism economy, and that we see 1.2 to 1.3 million visitors a year. So of course, when you have a disaster like the Little Knife fire that affected us most in the ash, it grinds everything to a halt very quickly.

NINA MOINI: And Linda, there was sort of a time at the height of the wildfires where you wanted folks to know that the area-- the Cook County area, the Grand Marais area-- there were areas that people could still visit amid the wildfires that were not impacted. But it was sort of as the news was growing about the area. Did you feel like people heeded your call to keep showing up? And how has the recovery process been?

LINDA JUREK: Wearing both hats as the director of tourism and then also the Chamber of Commerce, two days after we had our major ash storm, which was July 14, we immediately turned around and got a study out to our businesses. Within three days, we had 140 of our local businesses respond on what the financial impact was going to feel like.

And as you know, that smoke and ash was very much highlighted in all sources of media. So we, as a destination marketing organization, immediately pivoted our marketing and asked everyone to really just click on to any of our webcams, of which we have 6 across the county. And I would say the vastness of Cook County, the Little Knife fire, and even the fires-- I mean, it was a wind event and an ash event. I have never experienced that as a lifelong Minnesotan.

So that was quite interesting. I mean, it was jaw dropping the first few days with the ash. However, that subsided really quick and we quickly turned to letting people know that it was safe to be here. The fire was a very, very far distance from any of our small villages and towns along the shore of Lake Superior.

NINA MOINI: So you got the word out. How has economic recovery looked like in your area? Do you feel like people have been able to make some gains? Do you feel like maybe more people showed up this fall to try to help out? Do you have a sense for that?

LINDA JUREK: I did make a few calls in preparation for this interview, and I called our friends, the Ritters, who own Voyageur Canoe Outfitting, and they made a really big recovery. And that said, they had a very, very big social media presence all through the closure. Little Knife was basically the closest to this outfitter and they made back everything.

And they did that by connecting with folks about buying in their online store, making sure that they still come when it does open. And I've also had a couple board meetings this last week with both the chamber and Visit Cook County. And I'm not feeling that anybody is crazy afraid financially being of the tourism-- yeah, being of the tourism economy that we are. I mean like we turn quick.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and I think it's important though to mention, Ely is separate from Grand Marais. And there was a lot going on in Ely as well. And I'm sure there are still a lot of folks who were not able to recover to the point maybe they wanted. Michael, are you going to be doing any more studies around this in the works?

MICHAEL VASICHEK: So we actually have another person at University of Minnesota Extension who is doing a more in-depth study on surveying businesses and using that sort of data to forecast the impact of the event. And so that should be coming out shortly here.

NINA MOINI: And-- oh, go ahead.

LINDA JUREK: I would just also add, I just got off the phone with federally approved last week on Thursday is the SBA-- Small Business Administration. And they have put into place low interest disaster loans. And they will have a presence here in Cook County this coming Wednesday. And I would imagine that same programming and it will be repeated in Lake County for the Ely area and Northern St. Louis County.

NINA MOINI: Linda, I know you sprung into action on the events of this summer. And hearing you say, I'd never seen anything like that and knowing how our climate is changing, have you had conversations about the future? Did this feel like preparation for more difficult events like this on a larger scale?

LINDA JUREK: I would say that the biggest concern when it comes to a bigger-scale event is just nature's way of taking care of our Earth a little bit. And as you know, we've had a lot of spruce budworm. So our forest has a lot of dead spruce. That would be very ignitable. That said, I believe that that's more of a natural evolution of time for spruce budworm. It's nature's way of probably cleaning out old dead forest.

I think the biggest thing with this fire is that we have to remember that Canada, our neighbors, fight fires differently than we do. And I would hats off to every federal organization that showed up at all of our doorsteps and really helped throughout that whole fire and got our Boundary Waters Canoe Area and our lakes open for our visitors a lot earlier than we could have.

NINA MOINI: And just one last question for you, Linda-- what should folks know about visiting the area this winter if they want?

LINDA JUREK: Oh my goodness. I'll tell you what, I love living up here. It's the change of seasons. We're looking forward, certainly to some snow. El Niño can just be quiet.

[LAUGHTER]

NINA MOINI: It's supposed to be a bad one, but that's fine.

LINDA JUREK: Yeah, I'm just going to ignore that. Because even if it doesn't snow, Lutsen Mountains makes their snow, our lakes freeze. We have ice trails for skating. It is a glorious, glorious place to be.

NINA MOINI: And Linda, I liked what you said too about the webcams. And people can take a look for themselves at a lot of areas if they kind of want a real-time know what's going on. Thank you both so much, Linda and Michael. We appreciate your time. Hope we can catch up again sometime.

LINDA JUREK: Thank you so much.

MICHAEL VASICHEK: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: That was Michael Vasichek, a research assistant with UMD, and Linda Jurek, executive director of Visit Cook County and the Cook County Chamber of Commerce.