

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: Our top story today is the wildfires burning in and around the Boundary Waters. The US Forest Service has closed the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness for at least the rest of the week. Authorities have issued evacuation orders for the BWCA and some nearby areas, and we're hearing reports about some pretty dramatic rescues of paddlers and campers. Our reporter, Dan Kraker, joins us now from Ely, where he's been talking to officials leading the firefighting and rescue efforts and to some of the folks affected by these fires. Dan, thanks for being with us.

DAN KRAKER: Yeah, happy to be here, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Could you give us a sense for the scene right now where you are? We know it's extremely hot as well. What are you seeing?

DAN KRAKER: Yeah, it is. Right now, I'm actually in downtown Ely, but it is just oppressively hot here and dry, and the winds are starting to pick up. From town here, you can start to see clouds and smoke billowing up to the north where the fires are. There's no smoke here in Ely right now, but that is a concern later today, Nina, as smoke from the nearby campfire is expected to blow this way as the winds pick up later.

NINA MOINI: And I know there are many fires burning in the area, but it's the campfire that's of most concern right now in Ely.

DAN KRAKER: Yeah, absolutely. So the campfire actually has been burning for about a week, but it was really small, just like an acre or so for many days. Actually, forest officials say it was fully contained just two days ago. But then it jumped its containment lines yesterday when the fire behavior and fire weather just picked up, and we started to get this extreme fire weather. And the fire ran, like, seven miles yesterday in half a day, which is just extraordinary fire weather.

And those fire conditions are expected to remain critical today, Nina. So the winds are forecast to shift and blow south here towards the Fernberg corridor, and it's the main road that leads kind of northeast out of Ely, past the town of Winton, towards some popular Boundary Waters entry points like Lake One and Moose Lake. There's just a lot of resorts, cabins, camps in that area. So that's the real concern area right now.

NINA MOINI: And that area is under an evacuation now?

DAN KRAKER: That's correct. So Lake County Sheriff's Office, they put in that evacuation order early this morning. I was out at the checkpoint along the Fernberg corridor today where they closed the road, and I saw cars starting to stream out. I also saw outfitters going in with canoe racks because they were going to pick up clients who were still paddling out of the Boundary Waters.

And then officials are really encouraging folks to leave as quickly as possible. They're worried about some of this incoming smoke that blows in, and they're really worried about air quality, especially for folks with health concerns. Also, visibility maybe could be impacted later. And so they're worried that those could slow down evacuation efforts. So they're encouraging folks to leave as soon as they can.

NINA MOINI: And, Dan, the entire Boundary Waters being closed right now, that's a big deal, right?

DAN KRAKER: It is a big deal. It doesn't happen very often. It happened five years ago when there was another big fire, the Greenwood fire south of here. But it's a big deal because this is canoe country USA. The summer economy is really built around Boundary Waters trips. But yeah, as of yesterday, the entire wilderness area was closed.

So there are 12 Forest Service rangers who have been sweeping through the BWCA for the past five days. They started evacuating campers closest to the fires, and they've been continuing working away from the fires through the entire wilderness. But forest officials I talked to today, they estimated there are between 6,000 and 10,000 people in the wilderness at the time the closures were announced.

And people were told to evacuate to the closest exit point from the wilderness. Of course, that could be different from where they went in from where they left their car. So it's just this big logistical effort now from the Forest Service, and then outfitters and cooperatives are really helping out just to make sure folks can get out of the wilderness, get to their cars, get home safely.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. So I understand you're also hearing some difficult stories about some people who are having to be evacuated or rescued.

DAN KRAKER: Yeah, I did talk to one family today. I heard the story of a family who was paddling out of Basswood Lake. It's a huge lake north of Ely. And that's kind of near the area where the campfire really exploded yesterday. So I talked to Bailey Shin. She's from Texas, but she spends some time in Ely every summer. And she was in the wilderness with her husband and her three young kids.

They were camped on Pipestone Bay, which is on Basswood Lake. And she didn't even the BWCA was closed until she turned on her phone yesterday morning and saw messages from her mom. And so they were preparing to leave their campsite in the afternoon when they saw this huge smoke blowing toward them. And she says they started to even feel the heat of the approaching fire.

BAILEY SHIN: People who were paddling by us were yelling at us, like, the fire is coming for your campsite. You need to leave immediately. So we had started packing, and then we quickly started realizing that we needed to leave faster than we thought. Unfortunately, we had some large gear that was going to take too long to pack, our brand-new tent that we had just gotten, and we had to abandon some of it.

It was really, really threatening. And people were very much encouraging, leave now. Like, a boat came over. We said we're packing. He said, y'all need to leave. It's coming for your site. I mean, it was very-- we were, like, the closest site, and the wind was blowing towards us.

DAN KRAKER: And she says the paddle out was pretty harrowing, too, because the gusty winds were creating whitecaps that were hitting their canoes broadside. But they made it safely to the Fall Lake canoe landing.

NINA MOINI: I'm so glad to hear that. Dan, you know these fires started about a week or so. You've been talking about that. But it seems like things have really picked up in the last couple of days. What can you tell us about the effort to fight and then contain these fires?

DAN KRAKER: So there are about 200 firefighters in Ely now that's combating at least six fires, big fires around this area. Another 70 firefighters are stationed over in Orr. But support is streaming in from far beyond Minnesota to assist with these blazes, including a national incident command team that's expected to take over this fire complex management tomorrow. And so here's Joy VanDrie. She's Public Affairs Staff Officer for the Superior National Forest.

JOY VANDRIE: Oh, they're coming in from all over the place. Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Out west, coming in from-- one of our PIOs is from New Mexico. We have people in from Wisconsin. We have people in from the East Coast, from all over the place.

DAN KRAKER: And, Nina, there are also lots of aircraft battling the fires from above, dropping water on the fires. But with the extreme fire conditions today, it's likely to be a challenging day.

NINA MOINI: Dan, thanks for keeping an eye on this and for your reporting, and stay safe, OK?

DAN KRAKER: You bet, Nina. Thanks.

NINA MOINI: Dan Kraker reporting live from Ely.