

NINA MOINI: We're tracking two large wildfires that sparked over the weekend. The first, the Stewart Trail Fire, burned dozens of buildings on the North Shore. It's more than 60% contained, we are hearing today. It started Friday, just before a separate and much larger fire set ablaze forest in Crow Wing County, north of Brainerd. That's the Flanders Fire. It's only about 20% contained, and evacuation orders remain in place.

William Glesener has been following both of these fires, helping coordinate the efforts to do firefighting. He's the Wildlife Operations Supervisor at the Department of Natural Resources. Thanks for taking some time with us today, William.

WILLIAM GLESENER: Good afternoon.

NINA MOINI: Thanks for being here again. Could you update us on what you know, the latest about just how much area have these fires burned so far?

WILLIAM GLESENER: Yes. So statewide, as of today, we've had over 7,650 acres burned on 766 wildfires. The largest of those two are the two significant ones that we're dealing with currently, The Stewart Trail Fire, is 355 acres over by Two Harbors. And then the Flanders Fire is quite a bit larger, at 1,666 acres. And that's north of Brainerd, over by Cross Lake in Mission Township.

NINA MOINI: Can you help put into perspective just what that scale of a fire looks like or just help people to imagine these numbers?

WILLIAM GLESENER: So the numbers right now, for the year, we're at about average, believe it or not. But over the past two years, right around Mother's Day, we've had some weather events, hot, dry and windy weather that has occurred over a period of several days. And our average number of fires during spring fire season per day can be 10 to 15 to 20. And on those days, we were having over 40 fires in a given day.

And so during those time periods, it gets to be very dynamic, I'll say. And the other fires can spread quite rapidly, at times faster, three to four miles an hour. So we know that these fires started small. There were people there very close to the fire when it ignited. However, the public didn't have firefighting tools, and those fires spread very rapidly under the high winds and the dry conditions that we had. So within minutes, they were well beyond several hundred acres.

NINA MOINI: When things are changing so fast and you're helping coordinate, I'm assuming, between departments, or can you give us a sense for what firefighting efforts look like right now and kind of what your role is within those efforts?

WILLIAM GLESENER: So at the statewide level, what we do is we coordinate to bring in resources. So on the days that we had a lot of the activity, we brought in crews from Canada, Ontario and Manitoba, Wisconsin. And then we had several large aircraft come in from Colorado and elsewhere. So we had pretty much an air force and ground force all responding to the fires, along with-- and I can't give enough kudos to all the local fire departments and county staff that were responding to the fires that were occurring on those days.

And essentially, a call comes in to a 911 office, and then they send out the pages for people to start responding to those locations. So whether it's a structure fire or wildfire, it's pretty much the same process. Once they get on scene, a wildfire incident commander and a fire chief or a local fire department's incident commander will get together, and they will communicate with each other and establish a plan of attack to begin suppressing the fire as it happens.

So our number one priority is always safety of the public and our firefighters. And if they can't attack a fire safely, then we move into evacuation mode. And that's what happened on both of these large fires that we recently had. There was a significant evacuation area along Highway 61, which is still closed, north of Two Harbors. And then along County Road 11, in Mission Township, Crow Wing County had evacuation orders still in place as well for folks that were in those areas.

NINA MOINI: And thankfully, we have not heard of anyone being hurt or injured from these fires. Let's talk a bit about, William, containment. Sometimes we hear this 20%, 60% contained. Can you explain just what containment means and if you have an idea of how much longer it may take to completely put these fires out?

WILLIAM GLESENER: Yeah, so containment is essentially when we have a solid fire line around the entire perimeter of the fire. That could include a road. It could include a Lake. It could include a dozer line that gets put in as we're suppressing the fire. Once we have that fire totally surrounded, we call that contained.

When it is contained, there still can be fire burning in the interior, and we will not call it controlled until the interior fire is put out. So the process is we get it contained so it can't move anywhere anymore. Then we get it controlled. We put out all the interior fire. And then, finally, once it's controlled, and we've had it controlled for a few days, then we can finally call it out to make sure that there's nothing there that's going to rekindle.

NINA MOINI: There's a big holiday weekend coming up, obviously. Are you concerned about forest fires more while people are out and about? I mean, I'm assuming you are, but it's looking like this year's going to be of concern.

WILLIAM GLESENER: Yes, we had hoped that the rainfall that hit Southern Minnesota and some parts up north would have been able to come across the entire state. However, a large portion of North Central and Northeastern Minnesota got missed with that rainfall last night. We're hoping we get something coming in, but we have to plan for the worst.

And so we would ask that anybody that's going to be going out to the lake for the holiday weekend to make sure that they are very cognizant of what their local fire regulations are. So if there's restrictions in place, those types of things, be thinking about whether or not they really want to have a campfire down by the lake this weekend. We would appreciate it, if anybody sees any activity, any fires, call 911 right away so we can get on them when they're small and get them put out before they get big.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, William, I think a lot of people feel that it has to be very reactive when it comes to wildfires. But I know there's efforts by the DNR to remove dead trees that are more like fuel for wildfire, but that it tends to be more expensive. Can you talk about if there are any kind of preventative measures that the DNR is taking?

WILLIAM GLESENER: Yeah, we have a program called the Firewise program that we work with local communities and homeowners to clear out vegetation, make sure their properties are clean and green around them. And we try to make sure that folks are keenly aware of what they can do on their property to help prevent and mitigate the wildfire hazard.

NINA MOINI: All right, so folks can learn more about that and maybe take a look around their property as well as we head into this weekend. William, thanks so much for your time in the update, really appreciate it.

WILLIAM Thank you for getting our message out. We appreciate that, as well.

GLESENER:

NINA MOINI: That was William Glesener, Wildfire Operations Supervisor at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.