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**4,440-acre Duckett Fire 80 percent contained**

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All structures saved; rain, cooler temps helped firefighting efforts; campfire may be culprit

The Duckett Creek Fire has burned nearly 4,440 acres of public and private lands at the base of the Sangre de Cristos about eight miles northwest of Westcliffe. As of mid-day Wednesday, the fire was 80 percent contained and though there were homes nearby, no structures had been damaged or destroyed, U.S. Forest Service officials say.

Moreover, as of Monday, June 20, evacuations were lifted with the exception of the Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp and the Rito Alto mine area. The Lutheran Camp may open to staff only this weekend to begin clean-up efforts. Reportedly, ash covers most of the camp structures.

Roads in the area are also open to residents only, though the trails in the forest surrounding the fire are closed to the public. "Those closures," said USFS San Carlos District Supervisor Paul Crespin, "extend from Big Cottonwood Creek to Texas Creek from the bottom of the Valley floor to the top of the mountain."

Crespin also announced at a public information meeting Tuesday night that the cause of the fire remains under investigation, however, an unattended campfire is suspected.

The blaze was originally detected on U.S. Forest Service lands southwest of the Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp Sunday afternoon, June 12. It quickly got out of hand forcing the immediate evacuation of the camp, a few residents in the area and those camping and hiking nearby, as well as the closure of CR 198.

Residents in the Eagle Peak subdivision in Fremont County and residents in Custer County's Brush Creek Estates and Rito Alto mine area were also evacuated a few days later.

An evacuation center was set up at Custer County School for local evacuees and a similar shelter was set up in Cotopaxi for Fremont County evacuees. The local shelter was closed Saturday, June 18, said Custer County public health nurse Donna McDonnall, after all the evacuees left to stay elsewhere.

The Wet Mountain Fire Protection District was first on scene shortly after 3 p.m. on June 12, and they attempted to put the fire out. "We were hitting it hard," said fire chief Jerry Livengood at a public meeting Thursday, June 16, "when it started crowning around us and cutting off our escape." At the time heavy wind gusts, high temperatures and low humidity quickly intensified the situation.

Also dispatching to the scene to offer assistance was local office of emergency management manager Christe Feldmann; Custer County sheriff's office, posse and search and rescue personnel; and Custer County Road and Bridge Department with a water truck and driver.

Area U.S. Forest Service, Colorado Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and Division of Wildlife also dispatched to help.

The U.S. Forest Service called for additional assistance and on Tuesday, June 14, a Rocky Mountain Type Two Management Team, who

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set up camp at the rodeo/fairgrounds north of Westcliffe, took command of the blaze.

At the height of the fire, 650 firefighting personnel were fighting the fire. Resources included 18 hand crews of 20 firefighters each, 36 engines, four were tenders, six dozers, four helicopters, one airplane and overhead personnel. Those crews came from throughout Colorado, Utah, Texas, Wyoming, Montana and elsewhere.

Lower than expected temperatures and winds, and higher humidity over the weekend helped the fire crews to get the blaze under control, as did snow blanketing the Sangre de Cristos Monday morning.

By Tuesday, the fire was not posing a threat on the north, south or east side of the fire and was considered 80 percent contained. A total of 529,000 gallons of water and 149,300 gallons of retardant were used on the blaze. Dozers, and shovels were also used to dig lines around the fire.

As of Wednesday morning, firefighting personnel had been downsized to around 230 with four hand crews, five engines, one dozer and two helicopters. That number is expected to drop to 150 on Saturday, June 25.

The remaining firefighters are continuing to build lines around the west side of the fire.

To date, a total of 4,358 acres have burned with 2,970 acres on U.S. Forest Service lands, 1,280 acres on private lands and 105 acres on Bureau of Land Management Land.

Residents and visitors are reminded a county-wide fire ban remains in place including on U.S. Forest Service and BLM lands, in the towns of Westcliffe and Silver Cliff, and in the unincorporated areas of the county.

Additionally, a public information meeting regarding the Duckett Creek Fire is slated for Saturday, June 25, at 4 p.m. at Custer County School, and the county commissioners are holding a special meeting on Friday, June 24, beginning at 9 a.m. in the courthouse to get an update from Paul Crespin.

*– Nora Drenner*