



News Release

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Fighting fire with fire:

Cliff Creek Fire team strives to protect Granite Creek “on our terms”; Evacuation likely to stay in place into next week

Jackson, Wyo. – July 28, 2016 – Operations to protect the Granite Creek area south of Jackson by “fighting fire with fire” are unfolding exceedingly well, according to members of the interagency Cliff Creek Fire team.

“I’m very pleased with the progress that’s been made,” said Jackson Hole Fire/EMS Chief Willy Watsabaugh. “There is the potential for threat -- and we have been able to mitigate that so far -- but I have extreme confidence in what the team is doing and in particular, confidence in the burnout operations.”

“All of our folks have been really pleased with how it’s coming together,” Cliff Creek Incident Command Team Public Information Officer Julie Thomas said of the burnout operations, which began on Sunday. “It’s doing what it’s supposed to do -- backing down the hill slowly, burning dead fuels and patches of trees. We’ve had no problems or issues with it. Folks say it’s just textbook fire science that’s happening up there.”

The Cliff Creek Fire, which began with a lightning strike 5 miles north of Bondurant on July 17, grew this week from 16,325 acres on Sunday to 23,995 acres today. Officials are reporting 15 percent containment, with aggressive efforts to suppress the fire at its southern, southeastern, and western flanks near structures and ranches.

A portion of the fire’s growth this week and a notable increase in smoke plumes have come from the planned burnout operations. Burnout operations involve firefighters setting careful blazes within control lines to consume fuel between the edge of the fire and the control line. The controlled burn creates a barrier to the oncoming fire by using up all of the available fuel between the burnout and the fire. The “firing” is accomplished via aerial operations, as well as from the ground with hand torches.

“We’re doing this on our terms,” said Dale Deiter, Jackson District Ranger for the Bridger-Teton National Forest. “We’re picking the times and how intense the fire will be, rather than the fire doing it in a way that we have less control over it.”

Deiter said the threat of fire in the Granite Creek drainage is nothing new. For several property owners and local firefighters, the Cliff Creek Fire represents the third or even fourth time in recent memory that wildfire has come perilously close to the popular recreational canyon and its structures. It's only a matter of time before embers from the Cliff Creek Fire or another lightning strike would threaten the homes, camps and pool structures again.

Before proceeding with a burnout operation, the interagency team – including local forest and fire officials, as well as the national firefighting team being spearheaded by Great Basin Team 7 -- discussed safety, risks and benefits. The time seemed right. More than 700 fire personnel are on the scene, and the Granite Creek structures are as protected as possible now that Cliff Creek Fire crews have cleared brush, established dozer lines and laid sprinklers.

“Rather than having another big team come in and do this for a fifth time at a cost of more than \$5 million again, we can potentially not have to worry about this for the next 50 years. We can take the punch out of that area,” Deiter said.

Officials are uncertain when they will be able to lift the evacuation and recreational closures of the Granite Creek area. The Cliff Creek Fire Incident Command Team estimates that it will take another two or three days to complete the burnout operations. They will then need time to assess safety in regards to falling trees, smoke and mudslides.

The minute it is safe to do so, Thomas said, the fire team will allow Granite Creek property owners back home -- at least on a temporary basis – to look things over, gather possessions and begin winterizing.

Fire officials cautioned that smoke will remain noticeable up Granite Creek Canyon, particularly during morning inversions, for the remainder of the summer.

In days to come, hydrologists, soil scientists, foresters and wildlife experts will begin rehabilitation planning, and crews will stabilize areas where vegetation was lost to lessen the potential for mudslides, Thomas said.

MORE INFORMATION:

- For updates on closure areas, road conditions and other fire information, the Cliff Creek Fire Incident Management Team has a dedicated phone line for public information. That number is (844) 708-7666.
- Those interested in receiving Teton County-specific updates on the Cliff Creek Fire can sign up by texting the word TETONCLIFFCR to 888777 to register. Users can also sign up for those or other community notices online at www.Nixle.com.
- For Sublette County-specific updates, sign up here: <http://public.alertsense.com/SignUp/?regionID=1075>
- For general Cliff Creek Fire management information, InciWeb provides the latest updates from the U.S. Forest Service: <http://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/4865/>.
- The American Red Cross of Wyoming is available to assist those ordered to evacuate with shelter or other needs in Teton County. Evacuees who would like to register with the Red Cross, may call (307) 222-8272.

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