

Rocky Mountain Front fires down but not out



Karl Puckett, kpuckett@greatfallstribune.com 8:23 p.m. MDT September 8, 2015



(Photo: Photo courtesy of Northwest Montana Chapter, Forest Fire Lookout Association)

Rocky Mountain Front fires are down but not officially out.

Mike Munoz, district ranger for Lewis and Clark National Forest's Rocky Mountain Ranger District, called the 1 1/2 to 2 inches of rainfall over the long Labor Day weekend "a darn good slowing event."

"It pretty much shut things down in terms of their potential to increase growth," Munoz said. "The biggest concern we're focused on is the fire perimeter by Heart Butte and outlying homes."

Four fires have burned 64,581 acres west of Heart Butte, Augusta and Choteau, most of that the caused by the 53,889-acre Spotted Eagle fire that caused the evacuation of Heart Butte on Aug. 28.



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He suspects the fires will continue to put out smoke for awhile.

But new growth or new fires aren't expected.

"We won't call them out just yet," Munoz said.

Fires are first contained, then controlled and finally called out, Munoz said.

"You typically wait until winter to call them officially out," he said.

The Sheep Mountain and Moose Ridge fires are located within the Bob Marshall Wilderness west of Choteau and remain in monitor status and haven't grown since initial runs, said Kimberly Nelson, a public information officer with the Missoula-based Northern Rockies Type I team managing the fires.

"We're just continuing to mop up," she said.

The Benchmark fire west of Augusta is contained.

The fires burned entire stands of trees in many locations, Munoz said.

"It's typical for lodgepole pine, especially if it hasn't burned in 50 to 100 years," he said.

Because of the minimal fire behavior, the Rocky Mountain Ranger District on Monday reduced the large area closures that had been in effect since Aug. 28. Only areas within the existing fire perimeters remain closed.

Trails within fire perimeters including those in the North Fork of Birch Creek and North Fork of the Sun River will reopen when the routes are deemed safe, the district said.

It's possible camping won't be allowed in some areas in burn perimeters because fire burned vegetation and won't support stock use for awhile, Munoz said.


"Those are the things we're evaluating right now," he said.

The general-rifle hunting season opens Oct. 24.

The public should be careful in fire areas because burned trees could fall over, especially with the recent heavy rain, Munoz said.

About 30 percent of the Spotted Eagle fire that's outside of the remote country is now contained, Nelson said.

About 40 percent of the fire fell outside of the backcountry, with a portion of that running onto the Blackfeet Reservation threatening Heart Butte. That portion of the fire was actively suppressed.

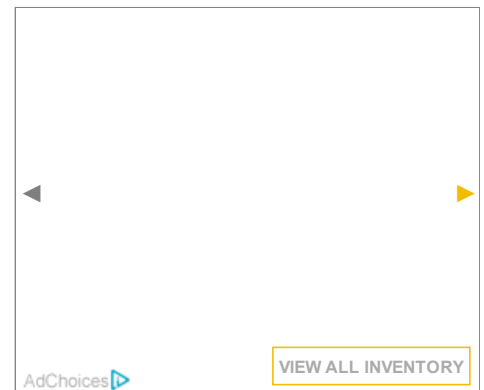



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The 60 percent of the fire in the backcountry will continue to be monitored. It was not actively suppressed.

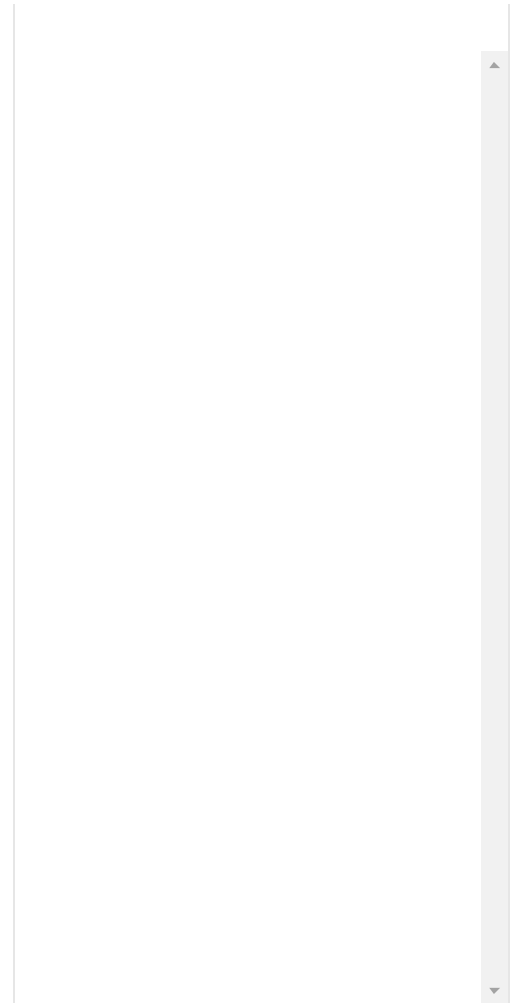
As of Tuesday, 271 personnel remained on the fires, most of them at Spotted Eagle, but Nelson said that number will decline over the next couple of days.

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