vinetur

Point Fire Scorches 1,200 Acres, Threatens Sonoma's Prized Vineyards

Nine Wineries Evacuated as Point Fire Ravages Dry Creek Valley

Friday, June 21, 2024



Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley, renowned for its century-old Zinfandel vineyards, is under siege from a rapidly advancing wildfire. As of Monday afternoon, the Point Fire has scorched 1,200 acres and is only 20 percent contained. Despite its rural location,

the fire's threat to the valley's prized vineyards and numerous homes has triggered widespread evacuations and a desperate battle to save this historic winemaking region.

CalFire is employing an aggressive aerial assault, utilizing helicopters at night and fixed-wing airplanes during the day to combat the flames. "This Dry Creek Valley area has residential, industrial, commercial, and recreational values at risk," said Cal Fire Assistant Chief Mike Wink. "All of those are of great concern."

Nine wineries have already been evacuated, including notable names such as Ferrari-Carano Vineyards and Winery, Bella Vineyards & Wine Caves, and Capo Creek Winery. Nora Feeley, spokesperson for Ferrari-Carano, reassured that the team, vineyards, and winery remain safe for now. "We evacuated yesterday and as a precaution, we will remain closed through Tuesday, June 18," Feeley stated.

These wineries are not only businesses but also custodians of heritage vines. Dry Creek Valley is home to over 9,000 acres of vineyards, owned by 150 different winegrowers, and is especially celebrated for its Zinfandel. The region boasts 32 vineyards listed in the Old Vine Registry, with some dating back to the 1800s. The loss of these historic vines would be irreplaceable.

Sonoma County has established evacuation centers at Laguna and El Molino high schools to support the more than 300 residents ordered to evacuate. Another 400 residents are on standby, prepared to evacuate if conditions worsen. In response to the fire, power has been cut off in the affected areas, adding to the challenges faced by residents and first responders.

Despite the vineyards' general resilience to fire, thanks to their water-retaining properties, the oldest dry-farmed vineyards are still at risk. This early in the season, the threat of smoke taint to the grapes is minimal, as veraison, the process where grapes change color and begin to ripen, typically doesn't start until mid- to late-July.

The Point Fire is the earliest large wildfire in Sonoma County since 2016, and it comes on the heels of a particularly rainy winter that replenished reservoirs but also fostered abundant vegetation, now serving as fuel for fires. This situation is exacerbated by the warm, dry, and windy conditions prevalent in Northern California, which has placed

much of the wine country under a red-flag fire warning.

Healdsburg, the nearest city to the Point Fire, recorded a relative humidity of just 10 percent on Monday afternoon, starkly lower than the 37 percent in San Francisco and 42 percent in Oakland. Meanwhile, Napa and Sonoma cities, though safe from the immediate threat of the Point Fire, experienced extremely low relative humidity of just 6 percent.

The American Red Cross has issued an unhealthy air quality warning for areas north of San Francisco, advising residents to wear N-95 masks if they must venture outdoors. However, air quality in San Francisco and the city of Napa remains acceptable, thanks to strong winds dispersing the smoke.

In the face of adversity, the community spirit remains strong. Smart Pizza in Guerneville is offering free meals to evacuees, providing a small comfort to those displaced by the fire.

As firefighters continue their valiant efforts to contain the Point Fire, the people of Dry Creek Valley and its iconic wineries hold onto hope. The resilience of this community, bolstered by its rich heritage and communal support, will be pivotal in navigating through this challenging time. The legacy of Dry Creek Valley's historic vineyards, cherished by many, stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of Sonoma County.