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Nevada governor chides Forest Service over fire

The Associated Press

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Gov. Jim Gibbons has criticized U.S. Forest Service officials' decision to let a wildfire in northeast Nevada burn unchecked for two weeks, saying it allowed the blaze to "get out of control" and substantially spread.

Federal officials initiated efforts to combat the lightning-caused fire Aug. 21, when it began spreading outside the scenic, remote Jarbidge Wilderness Area of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest near the Idaho line.

Since then, the fire has grown from 13 square miles, or 8,400 acres, to 76 square miles, or 48,779 acres, officials said. It also has moved from about 15 miles to 4 miles of the nearest town of Jarbidge.

The blaze was 30 percent contained Sunday. No homes were threatened, and no major injuries were reported.

"The forest fire that we have today was allowed to get out of control, knowing the dangers of the fuel loading and the weather conditions _ dry, hot, windy," Gibbons told the Elko Daily Free Press.

"That is an extremely dangerous combination that I think should have sent red flags up the moment the fire started to the Forest Service. If they disregarded those, then the Forest Service bears complete responsibility for the fire getting out of control and now reaching (its current size)," the Republican governor said.

Humboldt-Toiyabe Supervisor Ed Monnig said the agency initially tried to fight the fire, but later decided not to suppress it after concluding the area's rugged terrain would put firefighters at risk.

The agency allowed the fire to burn as part of a management practice called "wildland fire use," which is used to manage lightning-caused fires in remote areas where fire is a natural component of the ecosystem.

Fire experts had predicted there would be less than a 2 percent chance of the fire escaping the wilderness, Monnig said.

"We weighed the firefighter safety issues against the values that we were trying to protect and decided to take a less aggressive strategy to managing the fire," Monnig told The Associated Press. "Unfortunately, we had several strong wind events that have pushed the fire beyond anything we predicted.

"Firefighter safety is a huge concern when I look at deploying forces. We have lost 19 firefighters in wildland fires (across the country) to date this season," he said Sunday.

The fire area contains many insect- and disease-killed trees that would have eventually burned, added fire information officer Bob Summerfield.

"The fire is playing its natural role in the wilderness," Summerfield said. "It's better to let it burn this year under moderate fire conditions rather than another year under extreme fire conditions. It's cleaning up dead fuels in there that present a fire hazard."

Gibbons, a former five-term congressman, met with Monnig after touring the fire area by air on Friday with other officials.

Monnig pledged to conduct a review of his agency's actions concerning the fire and to allow a representative of the Nevada Division of Forestry to take part in it.

Monnig also said federal and state officials would tour the wilderness next year in an effort to determine management alternatives.

"I made some decisions, and we'll be taking a hard look at whether they were the best and most appropriate decisions," Monnig said. "We'll be looking at where we might improve our management in the future."

Ben Kieckhefer, Gibbons' press secretary, said the governor welcomed the state's participation.

Friday's meeting "didn't change the governor's viewpoint that the Forest Service as a policy matter ought to review how it handles wildland fires," Kieckhefer said.

Fire crews were hoping cooler temperatures and higher humidity would help them make progress on the blaze Monday.

"We are guardedly optimistic that we have turned the corner with this fire," said Paul Summerfelt, incident commander.

Slightly more than half of the fire _ 43 square miles or 27,446 acres _ has been confined to the wilderness area, which is 173 square miles, or 110,776 acres.

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