

TRAGEDY

19 firefighters killed in fast-moving wildfire; other injuries reported
Yarnell residents flee; half of its 500 homes may be destroyed
Lightning sparked fire; blaze continues to rage out of control

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The Republic | azcentral.com

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Nineteen firefighters, including 18 from the elite Granite Mountain Hotshots of Prescott, died Sunday fighting an out-of-control wildfire in Yarnell, a tiny Yavapai County town roughly 80 miles northwest of Phoenix.

About half of the town's 500 homes were feared destroyed by the blaze, which began early Friday evening, and by Sunday the fire had spread to more than 2,000 acres. All of Yarnell and the neighboring Peeples Valley were evacu-

ated.

"We are devastated. We just lost 19 of the finest people you will ever meet," Prescott Fire Chief Dan Fraijo said Sunday night. "We're going through a terrible crisis right now."

It is the worst firefighting tragedy ever in Arizona, eclipsing the 1990 Dude Fire near Payson, which claimed six firefighters. It was the worst wildland firefighting tragedy in U.S. history since 25 were killed in the Griffith Park Fire in Los Angeles in 1933.

Fraijo said one member of the local hotshot crew had survived because the firefighter was not with the other members when they were caught in the blaze, which was caused by lightning.

Mike Reichling, Arizona State Forestry



A lightning-caused wildfire destroys homes Sunday in Yarnell, a hamlet about 80 miles outside Phoenix. The blaze became the worst firefighting tragedy in Arizona history, killing 19 firefighters and forcing residents of the hamlet and nearby Peeples Valley to evacuate. The fire quickly grew to more than 2,000 acres and is uncontained. DAVID KADLUBOWSKI/THE REPUBLIC

Division spokesman, said the 19 firefighters were found in an area that also had 19 fire shelters deployed. Some of the firefighters were inside their shelters, which are typically used as a last resort to withstand the fire if it overtakes them. Some of the crew members were found outside the shelters.

Officials said 18 of the dead were members of the Granite Mountain Hotshots team. It's unknown which fire crew the 19th firefighter belonged to. The firefighters are part of a team that is typically sent in first to help cut off the fire, Reichling said.

Fraijo late Sunday declined to provide details of how the firefighters died, and he added that additional information would be released at 10 a.m. today.

The Yavapai County Sheriff's Office was notifying the families of the deceased.

"This is as dark a day as I can remember, with Arizona suffering the truly unimaginable loss of 19 wildland firefighters," Gov. Jan Brewer said in a statement. "It may be days or longer before an investigation reveals how this tragedy occurred, but the essence we already know in our hearts: fighting fires is dangerous work. The risk is well-known to the brave men and women who don

their gear and do battle against forest and flame.

"When a tragedy like this strikes, all we can do is offer our eternal gratitude to the fallen, and prayers for the families and friends left behind. God bless them all."

Brewer said late Sunday that she plans to tour the area today and could call the Legislature into a special session to provide emergency funding for the victims.

When asked if he could provide any update on the number of homes lost in Yarnell, Fraijo said his attention had been on more pressing matters all afternoon.

"Once we started getting notification of what happened, I lost all track of Yarnell," he said.

At least 250 firefighters were battling the fire late Sunday, and the force was expected to increase to 400 today, said Reichling, the Forestry Division spokesman.

The wind-whipped blaze also prompted officials to shut 25 miles of Arizona 89 between Congress and Kirkland, but residents of the hundreds of evacuated homes could still travel the estimated 30 miles to a shelter in Prescott, Reichling said.

Erratic winds, dry fuel and monsoon-like weather created conditions for the

fire to spread quickly, Reichling said. He added that the winds changed direction on the hotshot crew. There had not been a fire in the Yarnell area in 40 years.

"They were caught up in a very bad situation," he said.

The Wickenburg Community Hospital treated residents with minor injuries and smoke inhalation, said Roxie Glover, director of community relations at the hospital.

Glover said the emergency room started filling up about 6:30 p.m., and "it's been pretty steady ever since."

Those with more serious injuries were transported to other medical centers.

"It's a terrible tragedy," Glover said, noting the hospital had fielded phone calls from families wondering if their family member was among the firefighters lost.

Red Cross officials opened a second, larger shelter for Yarnell Hill Fire evacuees at Wickenburg High School, said Brian Gomez, spokesman for Red Cross Grand Canyon Chapter.

The new shelter was to open later Sunday night and had 475 beds, Gomez said. The other shelter, at Yavapai College in Prescott, has 100 beds. About 19 people registered to sleep in the Prescott shelter, Gomez said.

One of them, Jim Kellmann, 65, fled his Peeples Valley home with his wife, five cats and two dogs.

"When I left there was no fire but thick, black smoke," said Kellmann.

Kellmann said he and his wife were able to grab a few precious belongings, but that if his house is gone, so are many of their possessions.

The Prescott shelter can accommodate small pets and the Hidden Spring Ranch In Peeples Valley can take livestock and large animals.

Gordon Acri, who has property in Yarnell, described the situation as a wall of flame coming from the north to the south.

"It was just eating everything up in sight," said Acri.

He said he managed to get past a roadblock and get into town even though Yavapai County Sheriff's Office deputies urged residents to leave.

Yavapai County Supervisor Rowle P.

Simmons, who represents Yarnell, said he is devastated by the loss of life and the fire.

"I am physically sick right now," he said. "I know these firefighters. I know a number of them personally — one of them particularly I talked to when he first arrived. I've got myself pretty well composed right now, but I'm in a mess."

Simmons, who spent the morning and afternoon at the scene, returned home around 4 p.m.

"And that's when everything went to hell," he said. "I'm disappointed that I left when I did — I thought things would be ok. Little did I know it was going to turn into such a disaster. What I'm hearing is complete devastation down there. Propane tanks are blowing up."

U.S. Rep. Paul Gosar, who is Arizona, said in a statement that his "heart weeps for those who have lost their lives.

"My thoughts and prayers go out to the families who have lost so much and the first responders battling this difficult situation," Gosar said, adding he will continue to closely monitor the fire and keep in contact with emergency responders.

Speaker of the House Andy Tobin, R-Paulden, was shaken Sunday evening during a brief interview with The Republic. He could not confirm details of the number of people injured, and said the Department of Safety was on its way to take him to the scene.

"Tonight, we need all of Arizona's prayers," Tobin said.

Fueled by chaparral and grass, the blaze burned uphill on state land about 25 miles north of Wickenburg with 15- to 20-foot flames.

The Yavapai County Sheriff's Office evacuated the Double Bar A Ranch and Model Creek areas, officials said. A reverse 911 call was sent and sheriff's deputies went door-to-door to alert residents.

When the temperature warmed to 101 degrees Sunday afternoon and southwest winds were blowing up to 22 miles per hour, Reichling said.

The low humidity, type of fuel, topography and northwest direction of the wind was feeding the and pushing it up the hill toward the communities, Reichling said.