

Authorities have tips but no suspect

Fire damage, residents' return to be assessed

By Mitch Tobin
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The origin of the 34,000-acre Aspen Fire has been narrowed to a 20-by-30 foot area, but investigators said Friday night that they still don't know if the fire was set intentionally or accidentally.

The fallout

About 50 people have called in but, there are no suspects, said Bruce Maldonado, a special agent with the U.S. Forest Service.

Although 1,269 people continue to fight the fire, a rapid decrease in resources is expected in coming days as crews finish digging and burning out fuel breaks. The fire is 50 percent contained and has cost \$7.2 million to suppress.

The building of fire lines around the blaze's northern end went well Friday, although work stopped when crews found what they thought were explosives near an abandoned mine, said Buck Wickham, operations section chief. The liquid was actually sulfuric acid.

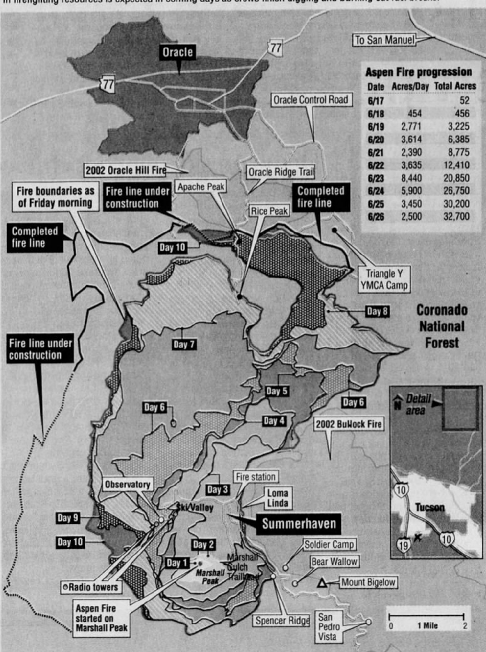
Power poles leading to Summerhaven have already been burned, and more damage is expected to the line because "it's in a pretty horrible place and it's an unsafe area to put crews," said Wickham, who expects the Aspen Fire to grow another 6,000 to 10,000 acres.

Crews will let the fire creep down the Catalinas' western slope since that's "doing a lot more good than damage" and the flames will likely peter out as the vegetation gets sparser, Wickham said.

Today, a team of scientists is expected to start assessing the fire's damage and the risk of erosion, hoping to produce a report by July 7 and treat 3,000 acres with mulch and grass seed by

Progress against fire

The Aspen Fire grew to 34,000 acres Friday and is expected to grow another 6,000 to 10,000 acres. A rapid decrease in firefighting resources is expected in coming days as crews finish digging and burning out fuel breaks.



just because the monsoons are so late," Ochoa said.

In Tucson, the monsoon's average start date is July 3.

After a week of the wind persistently coming out of the south and southwest, the breeze has died down and let smoke settle into communities around the Catalinas.

A smoke advisory for the area was issued Thursday and Friday by the American Lung Association and Pima and Pinal Counties. It urged the elderly and people with respiratory or heart problems to monitor the particulate pollution.

Smoke levels tend to be worse in the morning, when the particles are trapped near the ground. The particulates can cause coughing, itchy eyes, headache, dizziness and nausea.

"Almost invariably there will be more people that go to their private doctors, to urgent care or to the ER," said Dr. Michael Lebowitz, a University of Arizona professor of pulmonary medicine and public health. "For most normal people, it might cause a little eye or nose irritation, even a sore throat for some, but in the short run it won't do anything and go away."

The Forest Service has final say on when residents can return to Mount Lemmon, said County Administrator Chuck Huckleberry, but the county is working with a residents' group on re-entry planning, "trying to minimize the delay."

One big concern is the presence of friable, or easily crumbled, asbestos amid the ashes. "You don't want anybody stomping around in friable asbestos and wondering why they get lung cancer 20 years later," Huckleberry said.

He said the county will ask homeowners' permission to go on their properties and search for and dispose of hazards.

SOURCE: ESRI, GDT, Southwest Area Incident Management Team

Guillermo Munro, Dave Castelan, Chiara Bautista / Staff

July 18. The goal is to prevent runoff from damaging the Catalinas' infrastructure and ecology. The Aspen Fire is expected to

at least smolder until the monsoon. But it looks like the monsoon will arrive a few weeks late, in mid-July, said Rick

Ochoa, of the National Interagency Fire Center in Idaho.

"We're looking at perhaps record fire danger in Arizona,

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