

# Superior TELEGRAM

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## Scorched

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By: [Maria Lockwood](#), Superior Telegram

The largest forest fire to hit Wisconsin in three decades has been contained. The fire began in Gordon on Tuesday afternoon and traveled more than eight miles into Barnes and Highland, gobbling up 8,131 acres and destroying 47 structures. More than 59 people were evacuated, 22 of whom spent Tuesday night at a shelter set up at Drummond High School. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources spokesperson Bob Marwell confirmed Thursday that a piece of logging equipment started the fire. He said no criminal charges will be filed against the company.

As of 9 p.m. Wednesday, the fire was surrounded and contained. That doesn't mean it's out. Mop-up actions are expected to continue for a couple of days, according to the DNR, but officials have lifted the evacuation order. The public is allowed to return to their homes. An information line has also been set up for property owners concerned about how their homes fared, 715-376-4185.

Warm welcome

For Darald and Leitha Bothun, Tuesday's fire was their annual housewarming. The Rochester, Minn., couple was driving to their second home on Ellison Lake for the first time this year when they spotted the smoke. Fire vehicles and trucks carrying bulldozers passed them as they drove along County Highway Y. They got to the home and started watering the lawn.

"Just the uncertainty of everything, we didn't even unpack," said Leitha. "We left everything in the car and just for hours watched as the smoke came up and over Phyllis,' this cabin here. It was coming right toward us."

Then it switched and headed northwest. Just as they were feeling more secure, a law enforcement officer stopped to tell them the other side of the lake as well as Lake Beaugard had been evacuated.

"It was like, be on guard," Leitha said. As they were sitting on the deck, they saw a new cluster of smoke. The wind shifted and came straight at them. A massive cloud of smoke rolled in, turning the sun into a small round ball in the sky. Shortly after, a neighbor came by and told them to evacuate to the Barnes Town Hall.

The couple went to tell their 80-year-old neighbor they needed to get out. They brought her and her car with them as they left at about 8 p.m. Volunteer firefighters told the couple that by 8:30 p.m., the area was ablaze.

"And when we got into Barnes the cinders were dropping in that area," Leitha said, so they left to stay with friends on Middle Eau Claire Lake.

Wednesday morning, they returned to Ellison Lake to get their neighbor's medication. Both homes were standing although the scorch marks on the grass were 24 feet from the Bothuns' garage. Even though their elderly neighbor's whole backyard was burnt, Leitha said, it was like God just wrapped his arms around the house, protecting it. The couple stayed there, providing coffee to the firefighters refilling pumper trucks beside their home. The enormity of the fire is hard to wrap your head around, they said.

"We were kind of expecting the worst," Darald said.

"You feel thankful and relieved, of course, but then you're thinking of neighbors who are not feeling the same way we are, just down the road," Leitha said.

Coordinated effort

Beating down the wind-driven blaze, fueled by acres of pine trees, took coordinated efforts from DNR and federal crews, air support and 39 fire departments, the majority of them volunteers.

"At 2 in the morning we had over 20 departments on the fire," said DNR incident commander Larry Glodoski Wednesday during a press conference at the Gordon Fire Hall. Many of them got home from their normal job, suited up and spent the night fighting the fire. Although they were tired, Glodoski said, that's what these volunteers do.

"They're here to help the neighbors."

Agencies divvied up the duties. Law enforcement officers from Douglas, Ashland, Bayfield, Washburn and even as far away as Price and Polk counties helped evacuate people and block roads. DNR crews concentrated on the wildfire and volunteer fire department members protected homes and outbuildings from the blaze. Although they lost 47 buildings, 17 of which were cabins or homes, they saved 77.

"That's our goal here is to save structures," said Cable Fire Chief Kevin McKinney Wednesday. "We're doing what we can to save everything here."

A Tuesday evening wind shift sped up the fire and pushed it closer to homes. At one point, the fire was moving at a speed of two miles per hour, Glodoski said. Solon Springs Police Chief Jerry Olson was helping evacuate people along Comminsky Road when the wind shifted. He headed toward the Ellison Lake area through thick smoke.

"It was just like driving at midnight with no lights," Olson said. "Trying to back up you couldn't see anything. And the heat, you could feel it right through the window."

He recalled seeing what appeared to be hundreds of deer and even a wolf pack fleeing the fire as traveled around getting people and their pets to safety.

While the night of fighting fire was a blur, McKinney was impressed by the number of volunteers on hand.

"I guess the thing that stood out to me is the fact that these departments throughout the area that are miles away are willing to send equipment here, send personnel to help," McKinney said. "We have the Shell Lake Fire Department here. Shell Lake has nothing to do with this area yet they're willing to send people here, one of many departments from outside the area that have responded."

Douglas County holds regular wildfire training drills.

"What's ironic about this is we have run mock fires and we have run exercises and the footprint of the map we've used for those exercises and mock fires is almost identical to what this fire burned today," said Douglas County Emergency Management Coordinator Keith Kesler. "We have rehearsed this fire, it is scary, right up to the fact that the fire started moving north and then the wind switched and shoved it over toward Potawatomi Estates (in Barnes). I mean it is scary how close it is."

Although there have been other wildfires in the area, this one made its mark. It was, said McKinney, "as bad as a wildfire can be, unfortunately.

"I work in the area, so some of these people are friends of mine, some of these people are customers of mine so yes, it's disheartening that to have something like this happen in the area."

Manwell said touring the area, it was clear to see the success of Firewise prevention practices by homeowners. More on Firewise is available on the DNR website, <http://dnr.wi.gov> or at [www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org).

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