

Thousands of people. Six roads out. That's Tahoe's evacuation nightmare.

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In this file photo, traffic heading to Emerald Bay is backed up near Camp Richardson on Aug. 9, 2020, in South Lake Tahoe. George Rose/Getty Images

Every year, 15 million to 25 million people visit Lake Tahoe.

There are six routes that lead in and out of the basin.

It's simple math to get a picture of the nightmare that's waiting in Lake Tahoe when an order to evacuate a wildfire comes.

In 2019, several months after the Camp Fire destroyed the town of Paradise and killed 85 people, McClatchy ran an analysis of California communities to find the towns and cities that were at the most risk for wildfire. Their findings pinpointed Kings Beach in North Lake Tahoe as a "very high fire hazard severity zone." Not only is the lakefront town surrounded by dense, dry forests, with limited evacuation routes, it also sees thousands of tourists every day.

Another city on the list: Pollock Pines.

This week, evacuations near Pollock Pines gave Lake Tahoe residents a glimpse of what could happen to them if or when a wildfire explodes closer to home. On Monday afternoon, as the Caldor Fire was raging, bumper-to-bumper traffic piled up on Sly Park Road toward Highway 50 as residents fled their homes and heeded orders to evacuate. Several hours later, California Highway Patrol in South Lake Tahoe warned motorists of potential closures on Highway 50, which would shut off one of the main arteries in and out of Lake Tahoe.

This week, phones have been ringing at Tahoe's fire departments. As the air turned orange and the sky darkened, as flames raged just 45 minutes outside of the Tahoe Basin, residents and visitors alike have been calling in with questions about evacuating. On Wednesday, Officer Ruth Loehr, spokesperson for California Highway Patrol in South Lake Tahoe, said that Highway 50 was clear and not affected by the fire but that emergency officials are advising motorists bound for Tahoe to take alternate routes via Interstate 80 or Highway 395. The fire may still prompt temporary closures. Changes come at a moment's notice.

"We tell people now to prepare for whatever kind of emergency comes," said Loehr. "It doesn't matter if it's this fire. It could be a fire tomorrow. It could be a fire next week."

California has already surpassed 1 million acres burned this year, which the Los Angeles Times called a "grim milestone." And this horrific fire season is hardly over. Here we are in August, and a fire official told SFGATE on Wednesday that we are seeing fires typical of October.

"The drought we're dealing with is just astounding," said Erin Holland, spokesperson for the North Tahoe Fire Protection District.

For those who live in wildfire-primed neighborhoods and communities, like the ones that rim the Lake Tahoe Basin, evacuating is not a hypothetical situation. It's very much a reality to be prepared for.

"There is a mindset of readiness that we should have, no matter where we are at," Holland said.

Officials in Lake Tahoe are well aware of the calculations between the number of roads and the number of people and the chaos that will unfold when an order is given to evacuate the basin.

"If another large fire occurs on a summer day, hundreds of thousands of visitors will overwhelm the Basin's limited evacuation routes," reads the Lake Tahoe Basin Forest Action Plan, a document published in 2019 by the California Tahoe Conservancy. Between

2010 and 2017, some 350 wildfires were ignited in the Lake Tahoe Basin. More than 80% were caused by humans, according to the document.



Smoke hangs low and is pushed onto Mormon Emigrant Trail as winds subside on Aug. 18, 2021, in Pollock Pines, Calif. The Caldor Fire raged without containment through rugged forested areas of El Dorado County destroying structures as it grew to over 60,000 acres.
Allison Dinner/Getty Images

The majority of roadways in Tahoe are small, two-lane highways that already exceed their capacity for traffic on any given day because of the basin's high volume of tourism.

Neighborhoods throughout the Tahoe Basin are clustered on steep hillsides, surrounded by dense forests that are overgrown and extremely dry. For many residents, their home is situated at the end of a single road lined by tall trees, with one way in and one way out.

For a stark reminder of the consequences, Tahoe officials and residents only have to look back to what happened in the summer of 2007, when an abandoned campfire ignited the Angora Fire, which destroyed 254 homes and structures and burned 3,100 acres in South Lake Tahoe within hours.

The No. 1 lesson learned from the Angora Fire: Do not wait until the last minute to evacuate, Loehr said.

“Things are things, stuff is stuff, houses are houses. They can be replaced,” Loehr said. “But people and pets cannot. Take care of the important things.”

During the Tamarack Fire, at one point, law enforcement and fire officials huddled to consider what might happen if the fire veered toward South Lake Tahoe and what the evacuation orders would be. They looked at a map and went through the South Lake Tahoe region, community by community, discussing different evacuation routes.

"It is definitely on all of our minds because, of course, we're in a basin here," Loehr said. "We're not in a good area as far as fire safety goes. It's definitely something that has been talked about."



In this file photo, tourists flock to South Lake Tahoe, Calif., on July 4, overwhelming roads, restaurants and other infrastructure.

Tom Hellauer/Special to SFGATE

The limited, rural highway infrastructure in Tahoe reinforces the urgency of an evacuation order and the need to leave as soon as possible, or before the order comes, perhaps when authorities issue a warning. Or even sooner. Holland says that if you have a gut instinct to get out, follow it.

“That’s why leaving early is so important,” Holland said. “Because if you have one way out, you want to be the first guy on that road. You want to get out before it’s blocked. Before it’s congested.”

Holland said she often hears people say they will evacuate to the lake if there’s too much traffic on Tahoe’s roads. She says that idea is “disturbing.”

“That is bone-chilling to hear that,” Holland said.

For one, many wildfires blow up in red flag conditions, which are marked by high winds. “Those are conditions when you don’t want to be on the water,” Holland said.

If flames are bearing down and there’s no other way to escape, then Holland says she would seek shelter in the water as an absolute last resort. But the reality is, she said, if people are trapped in that scenario, if they are that close to the fire, then they are just as likely to die from smoke inhalation as they would from drowning. Intense heat from the fire is also something to be alarmed about. So don’t go to the lake.

Instead, follow the guidance and directions given by Caltrans and the CHP. Generally, if a fire is burning in one part of the lake, evacuation orders will direct drivers to an exit route in the other direction. So people in North Lake Tahoe may have to drive down the West Shore to Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe. Or vice versa, to Highway 89 and then Interstate 80 in Truckee.

“If there are evacuation orders, adhere to them,” Loehr said.

Wildfire evacuations last days, not hours, Holland said. She recommends being prepared to leave for at least 72 hours and for a potentially life-altering event. Visibility is a big issue during wildfires, so she advises keeping a headlamp in addition to a high quality mask in your glovebox. Know your exit routes. And have a physical map just in case cellphone towers get destroyed in the fire and service goes out.

“We just can’t have people take [evacuating] seriously enough,” Holland said.

On Wednesday morning, Lake Tahoe’s congressional representatives, the governors of Nevada and California and Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland gathered for the 25th annual Lake Tahoe Summit. This event began as a campaign to promote lake clarity. Now, its focus has evolved to wildfire risk.

“Even though the sky is still somewhat hazy with smoke, we can all appreciate the special beauty of this place,” Haaland said in her remarks. She spoke about the people who have lost homes and businesses in the Dixie Fire and the Caldor Fire. “This has come close to home for all of us.”

For information about evacuating in Lake Tahoe, visit [Tahoe Living With Fire](#), read the emergency preparedness guide for [South Lake Tahoe](#) or read the emergency preparedness guide for [North Tahoe](#).
