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Fire-ousted residents allowed back

Mounties reopen highway between exits 18, 19

By OUR STAFF

About 80 displaced Lake Echo-area residents whooped and applauded at news they will be able to go home at 2 p.m. today.

The RCMP will also reopen Highway 107 between exits 18 and 19 at 4 p.m.

"We've decided it's safe enough for everyone to go back," Halifax Regional Fire Service Deputy Chief Roy Hollett told a crowd gathered at Cole Harbour Place late Monday morning.

As of Monday morning about 120 residents were waiting to return to their homes.

Firefighters and RCMP attended the 11 a.m. briefing.

Two subdivisions were nearly lost to flames over the weekend, officials said. In some cases, returning residents will notice scorching on their mailboxes.

Two houses have burned and six others were damaged the group was told.

The fire is described as stable and controlled but there are still areas of open flames.

Officials surveyed the area by Sea King helicopter earlier this (Monday) morning.

About 40 Natural Resources firefighters and crews will be attacking the remaining fire from the ground, Deputy Chief Hollett said, but they are prepared if things go against them.

"We still have nine aircraft at the airport still on standby in the event of a flare up," he said.

As well, two crews will be using boats to access hot spots near the shores of Snow Lake in the Mineville area.

Boaters on Snow Lake are being asked to stay away from the southern end of the lake, the deputy chief said.

Several times during the briefing, RCMP spokesman Cpl. Joe Taplin urged motorists to give way to emergency vehicles working in the burn area.

One resident, who asked officials whether they were aware that winds are predicted to shift out of the southeast later today, was told that the forecast has been taken into

account in allowing people to return to their homes.

In case the forest fire flares up again, firefighters in some areas have left their hoses along the streets as a precaution. Residents have been asked to leave them alone.

In case a second evacuation is needed, residents were told that there are enough emergency services personnel working in the area, that they will receive lots of advance notice.

Cole Harbour Place is being used as a temporary shelter for some of the remaining 120 remaining evacuees.

There are 50 homes within the closed zone, including homes on Marjorie Drive and George Drive, both off Crowell Road; Leslie Road, Bastin Point Road and Heron View Drive, all off the Lawrencetown Road and Country Lake Drive in Lake Echo.

About 5,000 people were evacuated over the weekend after a wildfire started Friday in the Porters Lake-Lake Echo area and quickly swept through the brush and forest toward Lawrencetown. Most residents were allowed back into their homes Sunday night, but there are still restrictions in place as firefighters continue their battle.

RCMP had to put the roadblocks back up in the Mineville — Candy Mountain Road area Monday, because people were getting in the way of firefighters, Cpl. Taplin said.

"The general public will not be allowed down there. You're going to need your identification to get in and out of that area because there's so much fire apparatus in and around that area that we don't want people interfering with them in that area."

Highway 107 between exits 17 and 18 are still closed, but that didn't wreak havoc on Monday's commute.

"It wasn't bad," Cpl. Taplin said of the drive. "People used the alternative routes (and) they gave themselves lots of time."

On Sunday night, the magic words, "Mineville, Candy Mountain Road, you're all going to go home," effectively brought an end to HRM's weekend wildfire nightmare.

Only about 50 of the 2,000 houses evacuated over the weekend remained at risk. Some people began making their way home at 8 p.m. Others had to wait an hour longer to ease traffic congestion.

Faces at the Cole Harbour Place emergency shelter were all smiles after the announcement, a huge swing from tired and drawn expressions just moments before. One woman sank to her knees, arms in the air, while others whooped and whistled. A few openly wept.

Returning residents needed to produce identification to get in.

Highway 107 will be closed this morning between exits 18 and 19 so the road can be used as a helicopter landing strip. Residents are also asked to stay off nearby lakes as water-dropping aircraft will still be filling up.

RCMP now believe the fire started just north of the Wonderland Trailer Park in Lake Echo.

"When they were doing their spots the Department of Natural Resources kind of determined where it was," said Cpl. Taplin. "Once the fire died down there we brought the RCMP forensic identification unit in to take a look. That's where we believe the origin of the fire started."

He said investigators will work with HRM and Natural Resources fire services to determine how the blaze began. He said evidence has been collected and pictures have been taken.

While the standing room only shelter applauded when the residents heard they were going home, the biggest cheers were reserved for emergency workers.

"I've been there for the last two-and-a-half days," Cpl Taplin told the crowd. "And I just want to say HRM Fire, and (Department of Natural Resources) Fire, if I ever have an emergency I want them right at my back door."

That brought everyone to their feet for an extended ovation.

Outside the shelter people were energetic and busy saying their final goodbyes before heading home.

"We're talking about chugging a couple beer actually," said Danny Delorme.

Dominic Gaslaird was one of several hundred who were heading home around 5 p.m. That's when the Wonderland Trailer Park was opened up.

"Probably some sleep," said Mr. Gaslaird when asked what he was planning to do.

"We might even have a small barbecue. It is Father's Day."

The fire was considered under control Sunday evening, though crews were still battling scattered hot spots. Mayor Peter Kelly said a shift in the wind could put nearby homes in danger, which is why some roads remained closed. He praised the dedication of frontline workers saying without their efforts, many more homes could have been lost.

"They were phenomenal," said Mayor Kelly. "I can't say enough about what they've done for us. We owe them an extreme amount of gratitude for their dedication. They shone above everything else."

Red Cross volunteer team leader Ancel Langille took time to thank the Salvation Army. He said 72 volunteers donated 280 hours of work, providing more than 1,500 meals to the evacuated residents.

Despite the stress and worry spirits remained high throughout the day. Someone at Cole Harbour Place found at least one reason to celebrate, posting a sign on the wall of the temporary shelter that read Happy Father's Day.

Police have arrested four people, including one on Sunday morning, for sneaking past police barricades. Cpl. Taplin said police will determine later if charges will be laid.

Earlier in the day Deputy Chief Roy Hollett of the Halifax regional fire service said before the entire evacuation order could be lifted, firefighters had to be positive the fire wouldn't backtrack on itself.

"As soon as we feel it's safe to go in, we are going to let you in," Deputy Chief Hollett said.

He said one good sign is crews were encountering more smoke than fire.

Deputy Chief Hollett told reporters Sunday morning that the main area of the fire was now "deep in the brush," away from neighbourhoods.

"The fire is considerably further away from the homes than it was yesterday. Yesterday it was very touch and go at times, but as of this morning, much better," he said at about 9:30 a.m.

He said the main area of the fire was about six kilometres by one kilometre, but there are also smaller metre-sized fires near it.

Deputy Chief Hollett said the conditions in the brush were hot, dusty and smoking and sometimes the crews had to come back out because the conditions were so bad.

He said when it is too dangerous for firefighters on the ground, they rely on aircraft to fight the blaze.

Meanwhile, the fire that has been burning in the Tantallon area, which at one point covered 80 hectares, was under control Sunday.

Mayor Kelly said the municipality doesn't have an estimate of the cost of dousing the flames.

"It's not even a point of consideration right now," he said. "Whatever it takes, we'll do what we have to do."

There were 125 firefighters trying to tackle the Porters Lake-area fire. Two CL-252 Bombardier water bombers were called in to help battle the blaze. The one from Newfoundland was dousing the fires with 1,500 gallons of water every 10 minutes and another from Quebec, which arrived Sunday, dropped 2,000 gallons at a time.

Three Nova Scotia Halo helicopters and three smaller fixed-wing water bombers from New Brunswick were also on the scene.

Premier Rodney MacDonald said normally the province's fleet of aircraft is enough to fight such fires, "but when it comes to situations like this, we go to New Brunswick and other provinces (for) help."

He said crews from other parts of Nova Scotia were brought in to help. He said he was assured there are enough aircraft to fight the fires. He spoke Saturday to Defence Minister Peter MacKay, who indicated Ottawa would also offer help if it was needed.

The provincial government has been criticized for the amount of downed timber that remained in the area since hurricane Juan in 2003.

The premier said a lot of wood was taken out of the area, but there were complications because of a moratorium on moving logs from the area where the brown spruce longhorn beetle was found.

Mr. MacDonald urged people in need to call their local MLA or the premier's office to find out about government programs that they may be able to access.

The premier said government employees who were affected by the fire aren't expected to come to work today.

Carole Olsen, superintendent of the Halifax regional school board, said Bell Park Academic Centre in Lake Echo, Atlantic View Elementary in Lawrencetown and O'Connell Drive Elementary are closed today and any further closures will be determined on a day-by-day basis.

The junior high and high schools that serve the evacuated areas will be open, but students affected by the fire have excused absences today.

She said Grade 12 students from the evacuated areas will be excused from writing the provincial English exam on Tuesday. She said they should make individual arrangements to either have their final mark determined without the exam or take the test at another time.

Cpl. Taplin said power had been restored to all the affected areas except for Candy Mountain Road. He said Nova Scotia Power crews would work to turn those houses back on one by one.

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