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Article Launched: 05/29/2006 01:00:00 AM MDT

denver & the west

Wildfire spurs evacuations

By nightfall, illegal Jeffco fire claimed 80 acres

By [John Ingold](#)
Denver Post Staff Writer



A fire fueled by gusty winds burns Sunday in Pine Valley, about 7 miles southwest of Conifer. Three fire departments were fighting the wildfire. (Post / Hyoung Chang)

Pine - A small but worrisome wildfire on Sunday caused dozens of residents in the isolated subdivisions surrounding this mountain community to evacuate and sent firefighters scrambling to contain the blaze amid brittle-dry conditions.

By nightfall, the Pine Valley fire, about 3 miles south of Pine Junction and 3 miles west of Pine in Jefferson County, had consumed about 80 acres. Firefighters had the blaze about 25 percent contained. It had not destroyed any buildings.

Officials Sunday evening lifted their voluntary evacuation recommendation for about 370 homes. Mandatory evacuations still remained in effect for about a half dozen homes closest to the fire.

Firefighters were hopeful the cooler weather and higher humidity that accompanied a late-afternoon front would keep the fire down overnight.

"The weather is really working with us right now," said Jefferson County Sheriff's spokeswoman Jacki Kelley.

The blaze started around 2 p.m. when a property owner began burning a pile of slash - loose sticks and limbs and trees that are cut down around a property - and that fire got out of control, Kelley said. The action violated a county fire ban that took effect last week.

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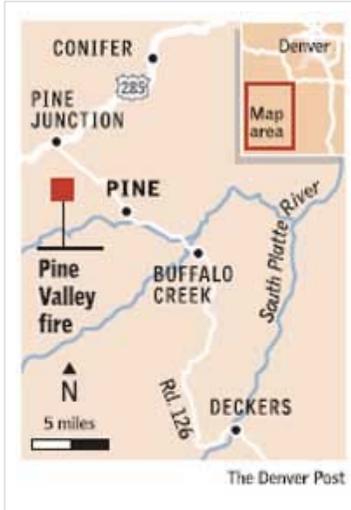
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Hot temperatures and high winds quickly fanned the flames. At times, the wind gusted up to 70 mph, Kelley said, making firefighting efforts difficult.

"We have had some success with using single engine aircraft and helicopters," Kelley said. "But they have been on-again, off-again because of the severe wind."

The sheriff's office sent reverse 911 calls to 372 homes in and around Pine suggesting residents evacuate.

A few, like Phil Tatro, ended up at Conifer High School, where the American Red Cross set up a small station for people to get food and drinks. Tatro said he, his wife and his 2-year-old daughter were relaxing



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Sunday when they started smelling smoke. Moments later, the phone rang with the evacuation recommendation.

"We've got our family with us, so we're in good shape," he said. "We packed a few key things with us, and we headed out."

Tatro said he remembers more destructive wildfires in the Jefferson County foothills in recent years. Kelley said the Pine Valley fire is within the burn area of the Hi Meadow fire, which scorched 11,000 acres in 2000.

"There's no directing Mother Nature," Tatro said. "There's no telling where it might go next and at what speed."

Others were less concerned. Bob Aston kept working on his new home Sunday even as smoke loomed one ridge away.

Aston said he didn't receive the reverse 911 call and the firefighters hadn't told him to leave.

"I don't think it's that big of an emergency," he said.

But officials warned that, with conditions as dry as they have been in years, there are no insignificant wildfires.

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"Any fire, I don't care if it's your kitchen grease fire, it's important to put it out as quickly as we can," said Jim Shires, a sheriff's spokesman. "That's why we try to get personnel in there as quickly as possible."

Staff writer John Ingold can be reached at 720-929-0898 or jingold@denverpost.com.



Karolyn Buck, from left, of the Salvation Army, Jefferson County animal control officer Chana Guy and Chuck Cubbison, an animal evacuation volunteer, strategize Sunday near the fire. (Post / Brian Brainerd)

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