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**Date:** October 2, 2020

**Subject:** Forest Order No. 05-15-00-20-15 – Sierra National Forest Closure Order

**From:** Dean Gould, Forest Supervisor



This document explains my rationale and the regulatory basis for implementing Forest Order 05-15-00-20-15, hereby closing the proclaimed area, roads, and trail systems within the designated boundary of the Sierra National Forest. This Forest Order will be effective from October 3, 2020 through November 1, 2020.

On the evening of September 4, 2020, a wildfire ignited below Camp Sierra on the High Sierra Ranger District, in the Sierra National Forest. By September 30, 2020 the Creek Fire had grown from its original size of 3 acres to more than 307,051 acres and is currently at 44% containment. The Creek Fire grew so quickly one afternoon that it encircled a popular boat launch and lake area. As a result, 150 people were entrapped by the fire and had to be evacuated by helicopters from the Army National Guard. The Fire has burned across both the Bass Lake and High Sierra Ranger Districts, within Madera and Fresno Counties. Popular corridors associated with forest visitor use on both districts were heavily impacted by the fire in areas that include Sky Ranch, Beasore, Central Camp, Mammoth Pool, Huntington Lake, Big Creek and Kaiser Pass roads. Popular reservoirs including Huntington Lake and Mammoth Pool Reservoir and their surrounding areas sustained severe burn over. Also affected by the blaze were several recreational residences, resorts, fire stations, facilities, designated recreation sites and private communities. The Creek Fire's rapid rate of spread early on and its growth beyond 300,000 acres has required two "Type 1" (the largest) Incident Management Teams working together on suppression efforts. Because the fire is not controlled and active fire remains, there is a high risk of flare ups or uncontrolled runs.

A vast area of the rest of the Forest is also unsafe, posing an ongoing threat to the public. The Forest is currently occupied by emergency personnel and equipment actively engaged in fire suppression and rehabilitation efforts within the closure. Emergency personnel are utilizing several Forest corridors, requiring the right-of-way as they come through with heavy equipment and large vehicles. Forest personnel also continue to engage in active restoration efforts, including the use of tree falling, construction, rehabilitation, and maintenance of fuel breaks. Soil erosion and rockslides are a cause for concern and can impede roadways within burn areas. Numerous dead standing trees across the Forest are a result of the fire's destruction, California's recent prolonged drought, and insect infestation. Entrapment of people on road corridors with unburned vegetation is also of great concern within active fire areas. With continued high temperatures and dry weather conditions, fire hazards remain high and dangerous on the Sierra National Forest.

Furthermore, nationally, and within California, firefighting resources are operating at maximum capacity and there are significant response shortages. California has experienced an unprecedented



and dire fire season this year. Currently, 13 of 18 National Forests in the Pacific Southwest Region in California are attempting to suppress large fires. Nearly all of these fires are now considered “complexes,” which are a series of fires in close proximity to one another that have burned into a single large unit. Because so much of California’s landscape is burning, it is experiencing a continuous need for fire resources to combat these incidents. All local crews are currently assigned to firefighting activities, and all available resources, such as engines, aircrafts, etc., have already been assigned to this or other active fires. In addition, nationally, there are now very few Incident Management Teams available to respond to new large-scale blazes. Fire dispatch centers have been unable to fill additional resource orders (for firefighters, equipment, aircraft, etc.) throughout the U.S. This situation means that should additional fires break, the agency may not be able to respond in a timely manner, further risking life and property.

With emergency response resources stretched so thin, the Forest’s ability to rescue or evacuate Forest users is compromised. When fires ignite, massive evacuation efforts are typically initiated to get the public out of harm’s way. Considering the expansive opportunities for Forest recreation on the Sierra, it is likely that Forest users would not be readily reachable even if there were an emergency first responder available for evacuation efforts. This would place the public in a very dangerous position, at extreme risk of being overtaken by the fire. Also during mass evacuations, the public adds to the congestion on the roadways, many of which are windy and mountainous with limited clearance for large firefighting equipment. Not only does this situation put both firefighters and members of the public at risk, but these circumstances directly slow the initial firefighting efforts. To ensure that the public does not get trapped by the many hazards currently on the landscape, including fire, tree falls, mudslides, and suppression equipment, it is critical that the Forest remain closed to public use. This closure will also provide a tactical advantage and allow resource allocation and firefighting activities an opportunity to get ahead of these fires while protecting the public and Forest Service employees.

This closure will remain in effect until November 1, 2020, but will be assessed on a day-to-day basis until I determine it is safe to be lifted.

This Forest Order includes an exemption for persons with a Forest Permit for Use of Roads, Trails, or Areas Restricted by Regulation or Order (Form FS-7700-48). Authorization under this exemption will only be provided if I or my delegate determine that the risk to personal health and safety is reasonable considering the circumstances of the request. We may also require appropriate personal protective equipment and other necessary safety measures.

Scoping regarding this temporary closure involved discussions with multiple local, state, and federal agency cooperators. I have concluded that this decision may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA) under the National Environmental Policy Act. This action falls within the category identified in 36 CFR 220.6(d)(1) – prohibitions to provide short-term resource protection or to protect public health and safety – and does not require documentation in a decision memo, decision notice, or record of decision. I have determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances associated with this temporary closure. Implementation of the decision may begin immediately.