

Crews go to great lengths to save Rim Fire big trees

By Diana Marcum, Los Angeles Times

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK – Each afternoon the fire's thunderous plume rose.

At night, helicopter crews at the Crane Flat lookout watched a line of orange burning across the horizon. The line kept drawing closer.

By the last week of August, every effort to halt the Rim fire before it moved deeper into the national park had failed. The blaze now had a clear path to the Tuolumne and Merced groves of giant sequoia, and the Rockefeller grove, one of the last stands of giant sugar pine untouched by logging.

On Aug. 30, a Friday, a group of firefighters gathered at the lookout to launch a risky plan to protect some of Earth's oldest and largest living organisms.

Even Ben Jacobs, the division commander, was nervous.

Jacobs, 55, had fought wildfires and managed prescribed burns at Sequoia Kings Canyon National Park. But he had seen crews take chances earlier in the week trying to save family camps and businesses. If they'd gambled for buildings, what would they do for living giants?

He also worried that if crews lost control of the backfires they were about to ignite, flames could spread for miles, even as far as the Merced River, west of the park's famous valley.

"Listen," he said. "Nobody wants to be the guy who burned down Yosemite."

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