

Northern California Valley fire damages part of huge geothermal power generator

Ivan Penn, Los Angeles Times, 9-15-15

Fires have damaged five cooling towers at the Geysers geothermal power generation facility.

The facility continues to produce electricity at more than two-thirds of its full capacity, said Brett Kerr, a spokesman for the plant's operator, Houston-based Calpine.

The Geysers, which sits on 45 square miles along the Sonoma County and Lake County border, is the world's largest geothermal power production operation with a fleet of 14 powerhouses.

In addition to the five cooling towers, the facility has sustained damage to some power lines and communications. But the powerhouses themselves have not been damaged by the fires, Kerr said.

"We got a report this morning the wind is shifting away from the Geysers," Kerr said. "Then we got a report the wind had shifted back. It's such a dynamic situation."

At 725 megawatts of power, the Geysers provides more than 10% of Calpine's electricity generation in California and employs about 300 workers and 150 contractors.

Geothermal power plants, which tap naturally occurring steam beneath the Earth's surface, can run 24 hours a day and are considered clean energy sources, which makes the Geysers a significant power source at a time when the state is increasingly moving away from fossil fuels such as coal and natural gas.

Steven Greenlee, a spokesman for the California Independent System Operator, which manages the state's electric grid, said the troubles at the Geysers have not threatened reliability of electric service in the state.

Fires in Northern California have damaged more than a dozen power lines, but Greenlee said the grid remains reliable.

"It does cause congestion on the system but that's manageable," Greenlee said.