

III. Madera Mariposa-Merced Unit Major Fires

Undoubtedly the most disastrous wildfire to strike the Madera and Mariposa Counties was the Harlow Fire of July 1961. The Harlow burned 43,329 acres in Madera and Mariposa Counties, destroyed 104 structures and claimed two lives. What was truly remarkable about the Harlow was how fast it spread. In two hours it burned 20,000 acres making it one of the fastest burning fires ever recorded in the United States.

Perhaps the largest, modern fire event in Mariposa County occurred in Mid July 1939. That year, an unusually heavy grass crop had dried and then been subject to a late spring rain. This had caused the dried grass to partially decompose, creating a fuel that “carried fire as if it were gasoline” according to one witness. In a ten day period, 5 major fires burned through the county: A fire started on Bear Creek west of Bear Valley and burned over Mt. Bullion before being stopped on Whitlock Road. North of Catheys Valley, on Guadalupe Mountain a fire southwest from Catheys Valley through the Bridgeport district to White Rock Road. In Bootjack another fire burned out the area surrounded by Triangle Road on the north and east, Highway 49 on the south and Highway 140 on the west. Simultaneously, a fire in the Merced River Canyon burned 8,000 acres. All told, in those ten days, nearly 100,000 acres of Mariposa County burned.

Madera County was by no means spared from similar conflagrations. In 1906 a fire started on the Fresno River near the present intersection of Yosemite Springs Parkway and Road 400 and burned to the San Joaquin River near North Fork. A similar fire in 1916 started and burned from the present Hensley Lake to the San Joaquin River south of North Fork.

The conditions that created havoc in Mariposa County in 1939 were also shared with Madera County. A fire started by a construction blast near Picayune south of Coarsegold burned westward to the San Joaquin River, while another fire, the Point Source Fire, started north east of North Fork near Chawanakee and burned to Kaiser Pass. This latter fire destroyed an estimated 61 million board feet of timber on over 20,000 acres of land.

When these fires occurred, our mountains had few residents or suppression resources. Since then, fire fighting capabilities have increased tremendously but so have the number of homes in the wildland. Any of the aforementioned fires, or even a portion of one, would quite easily today claim the infamous title of our communities’ most destructive fire.

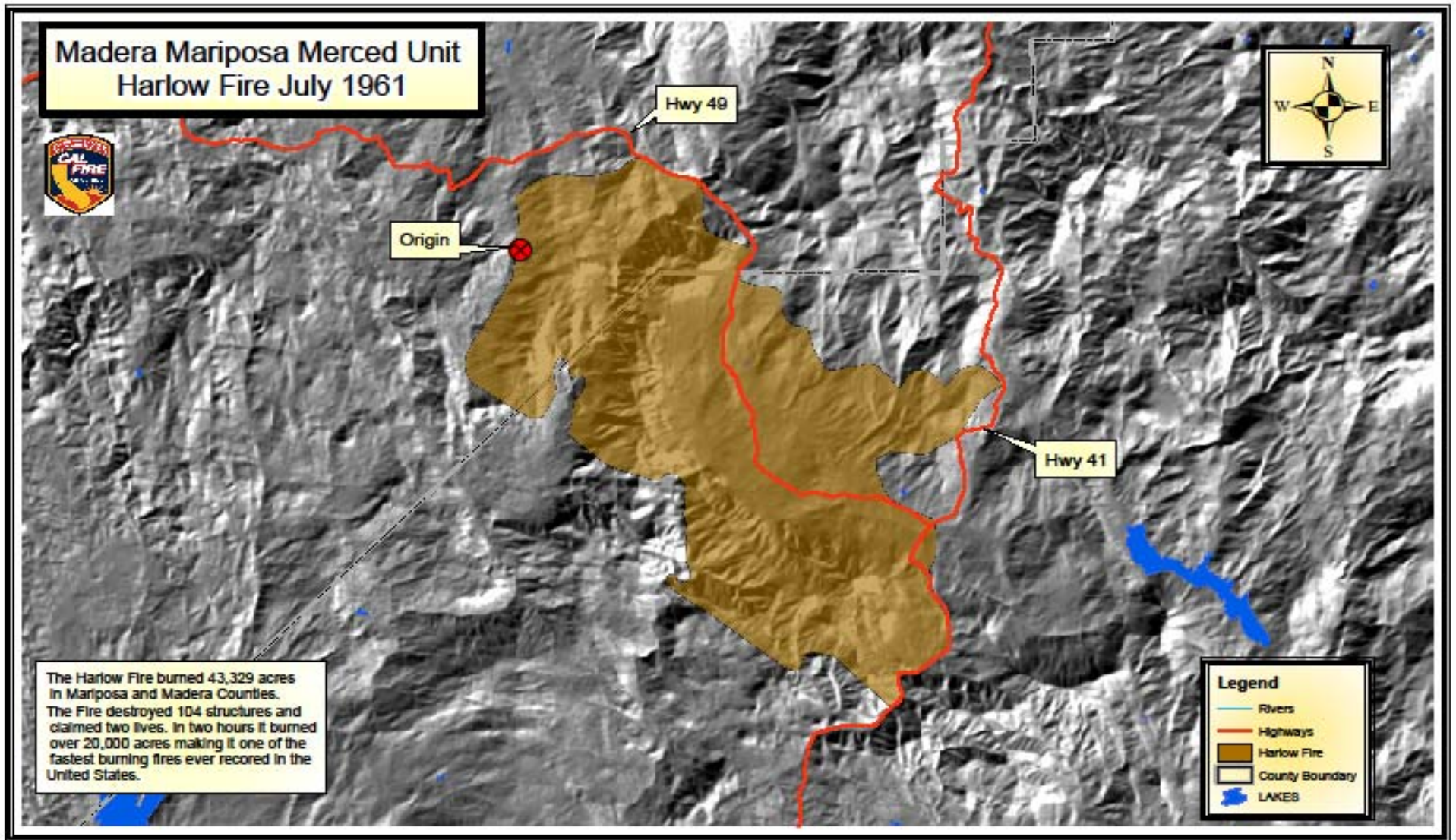


Figure 11 – Madera-Mariposa-Merced Unit Harlow Fire July 1961