

Thousands of undocumented immigrants among those affected by Northern California wild fires

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14 October 2017

Among the victims of the fires that have ripped through California's wine country this week are thousands of undocumented workers, who make up the work force of vineyards, wineries and in tourism.

Different from other crops, vineyards depend on a year-round work force, as do the wineries. As a result, many undocumented immigrants and their families have established roots in the area. One Sonoma County official estimated that 20,000 undocumented workers live and work in the county.

Federal immigration agents have reportedly suspended their activities in Northern California because of the fire emergency according to ICE spokesperson James Schwab. He did not indicate when that suspension would end. Still, many immigrants are being extra cautious and hesitate to seek aid or refuge in shelters provided by the state.

The *Sacramento Bee* spoke to Sonoma County Supervisor Lynda Hopkins who was checking out reports of caravans of immigrant workers and their families heading toward the Pacific Coast: "I saw dozens of families," she said. "They are traumatized. They lost homes. It is cold out there. But they are afraid that they will be targeted by ICE, if they go to shelters."

Sonoma County officials have vouched for the safety of immigrants in county shelters and the Sonoma County Sheriff also tried to assure immigrant workers. According to the *Sacramento Bee*: "There's a rumor out there that people are checking immigration status in shelters and that is not true. Shelters are asking for names because they want to identify the people who are coming into the shelter. Immigration status will not be asked of you..."

Once they return back to their homes, undocumented workers may not be allowed through checkpoints, however, since police officials will demand government issued IDs. However safe immigrant families may feel in shelters, it is certain that they will be excluded from long term federal emergency help.

As of Friday morning, forest, field and brush fires continued their devastation in Northern California.

The series of fires sweeping through wine country have obliterated 3,500 homes and businesses, including historic wineries and more than 90,000 businesses and homes have been left without power. Since the wild fires hit last Sunday night authorities have been busy carrying out mass evacuations, barely staying ahead of the spreading flames, including all 3,500 residents of the city of Calistoga.

So far at least 31 people have died and 600 have been reported missing in the northern counties of Sonoma, Mendocino, Napa and Yuba. Most impacted have been the elderly—the average age of the victims is 79, according to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*.

One of the most tragic deaths took place on Thursday in Mendocino County. Kai Shepherd, a 14-year-old youth, died as his family was escaping the Red Wood Valley. The family was fleeing together in a car when it was engulfed in flames. His sister Kressa, 17, survived but lost her legs; both she and her parents will require skin grafts.

Daniel Berlant, California Fire Assistant Deputy Director declared that, collectively, these are the deadliest fires in the state's history. "We haven't seen anything like this in Northern California," said Governor Jerry Brown, who has declared states of

emergency in nine counties. Brown warned on Thursday that the efforts to combat the fires is “not in any way finished.” There is great concern of further destruction since the fires have already hit urban areas.

Daniel Swain, a climate specialist from UCLA, in an interview with the BBC network, described the extraordinary climate events that combined to create these catastrophic fires—a combination of a wet winter, which triggered the growth of underbrush, a hot summer that dried it out, and hot and dry desert westerly winds that occur every autumn. “Unfortunately, all the conditions are present for an unprecedented event,” declared Swain.

As if all that were not enough, the strong winds have significantly degraded the air quality in the San Francisco Bay Area, affecting people suffering from pulmonary conditions, and forcing the cancellation of outdoor events this weekend. A local air quality official said that the air in the Bay Area on Thursday and Friday was the worst ever, and comparable to the highly polluted air in Beijing. Oakland, 45 miles (72 km) south of the fire, has been covered in smoke.

There is more optimism in Southern California where fires broke out in the hills and suburbs south of Los Angeles earlier this week. Lower wind activity on Wednesday allowed firefighters to gradually gain control and set a perimeter around the Canyon Fire 2. It is estimated that 65 percent of the fire is now under control. Barring a surge of wind activity, Orange County officials hope that the fire will be fully contained by Saturday, meaning that there will be minimal possibility that the fire would jump out of its perimeter.

Since it began on Monday morning, the Canyon Fire 2 has consumed 10,000 acres of land. It has destroyed 25 structures in the cities of Anaheim, Orange and Tustin, including 15 homes, while 48 other structures were damaged.



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