

Northern California fire survivors: “It’s shameful they didn’t warn us”

Our reporters
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Thousands of people are without homes in Northern California in the wake of deadly fires that ravaged more than 330 square miles. The fires have killed 42 people and destroyed more than 8,000 buildings, mainly homes. Preliminary estimates of the damage exceed \$1 billion.

The battle to contain the deadly wildfires made progress over the weekend. Rainfall on Thursday was a boon to the more than 8,000 firefighters who have been working extended shifts since the fires broke out two weeks ago.

On Sunday, Cal Fire reported that the Nuns and Tubbs fires, closest to the city of Santa Rosa, in Sonoma County, were 89 and 94 percent contained, respectively.

California has fires every year, but they are usually confined to the more rural areas. This time, fire invaded the heart of cities, sometimes fanned by winds up to 50 miles per hour. Whole neighborhoods went up in minutes.

In Santa Rosa, 50 miles north of San Francisco, dozens of city blocks in the central northern part of the city were burnt, including most homes in the Coffey Park and Fountain Grove neighborhoods.

At the height of the fires, 100,000 residents were evacuated. They have spent each night in makeshift accommodation—local hotels, the homes of friends, shelters—unable to go to work and not knowing whether they have homes to return to.

Many of them have lost everything. Residents in Sonoma County were forced to flee their homes in the very path of the flames in the early hours of October 9, when officials decided not to activate the cell phone warning system. People awakened by smoke and heat rushed to warn neighbors by hammering on doors and honking car horns.

One family fleeing by car was overtaken by flames and severely burned, one fatally. Anyone with mobility issues faced almost insuperable odds. Many of the victims were elderly.

A WSWs reporting team went to Santa Rosa on Friday and found people lined up to get into the crowded local assistance center of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Forms were brought out for them to fill out as they waited to be admitted to the building.

The team brought a copy of the WSWs article, “Why weren’t residents warned about the Northern California fires?” The leaflet was warmly received. The near total lack of warning was a burning topic of discussion and a good deal of anger among those who had been impacted by the fire.

Scott told the WSWs that there had been a community meeting the night before that got quite heated. Several of the residents complained that they had received no warning of the fire and had barely gotten out with their lives. They grabbed a few key documents and left their homes within minutes.

Kimberly, who lined up at the FEMA center with her mother, Kelly, was also angry about the lack of warning to residents when the fire broke out. “They can send amber alerts. It’s shameful they didn’t warn us. It’s just BS when they say they couldn’t send alerts. We were in Coffey Park. A cop came down the block with no siren on. They needed to warn people.”

Not only did the authorities fail to notify the population of the imminent danger; in some cases they provided misinformation to the residents. Another resident, Andrea said, “As I saw the fire approaching, I called 911, and they said that my area was ok. I went online, and it wasn’t. They should have told us that if you’re within a mile: get out. We scrambled to get out,

but it was absolute chaos. You don't know what to take."

Joey said, "My family's house burned down near Fountain Grove." Their lives were saved when he was awakened by residents urgently "honking their car horns." Joey looked out the window to see "the sky was glowing red and everyone was leaving the area. I had to wake up my parents. We only had a few minutes to get out."

Fleeing residents noticed the density of the tinder-dry undergrowth, the result of years of cuts in fire prevention budgets. Kimberly said, "There was so much brush around; they should have been clearing it."

Scott, a contractor, added, "The shocking thing was to see all the brush laying all around, just fuel for the fires. You have to clear the danger and prepare in advance. Proper building codes would have saved many homes. That was not done."

Preparations for the future urgently need to be taken, he said. "The situation is not a question of if there is another a fire, but when this will happen again."

Those lined up outside FEMA spoke of how their lives were devastated by the fire. They had none of their possessions but needed to return to work. Kimberly said, "Three of us have been staying at my brother's place. I've been off work two weeks. I had to buy new work clothes and boots."

Many lost everything they possessed in the fire. Insurance companies, they informed the WSWs, wanted them to write down a complete list of their destroyed property. Kimberly said, "The insurance companies are insane, wanting you to write down everything you've lost."

"How do you begin to figure that out?" Andrea asked, "We've lost everything. We didn't have any rental insurance and everything burned to the ground. So much that we lost cannot be replaced. Family photo albums, all of our memories and keepsakes."

On Friday people were allowed to start returning to their neighborhoods to view the devastation.

They face a daunting prospect. The California Department of Public Health has warned that toxic chemicals will be present in the ash. People should wear tight-fitting N95 or P100 respirator masks, sturdy gloves, long-sleeved shirts and long pants when cleaning up ash, and persons who get ash on their skin should wash it off immediately, as the wet ash can

cause chemical burns.

Anyone who has lost a home now confronts the difficulty of finding another one in a region that has suffered a severe housing crisis for decades.

According to KTLA, a California television station, Santa Rosa was "one of the last vestiges of affordable housing compared with the rest of the Bay Area."

Figures from the National Association of Realtors indicate that in 2017 a typical home in Santa Rosa was valued around \$600,000, compared with San Francisco's \$1.2 million and Marin County's \$1 million.

Before the fires, Santa Rosa had a severe lack of housing, with a vacancy rate of only 3 percent. Rick Laws, senior vice president in Santa Rosa for Pacific Union International real estate agency, told KTLA that "about 5 percent of the housing stock of Santa Rosa" has been destroyed by the fires. "That's huge," he said.



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