

Survivors of Northern California fires face new ordeal of recovery

Therese Leclerc
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The fires are out in Northern California. The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection has announced that all the wildfires that have ravaged the counties of Napa, Lake, Sonoma, Mendocino, Butte and Solano, north of San Francisco, since October 9 have been completely contained.

At the height of the blaze, 42 residents lost their lives as 10,000 firefighters, many of them volunteers, worked shifts of up to four days straight to battle the infernos. Crews were mobilized from throughout the state. Others came in from neighboring Nevada and Oregon and from as far away as Canada, Mexico and Australia.

With the extinguishing of the flames, however, the ordeal for the survivors has entered a new stage.

The fires are the most severe California has ever faced. Some 15,000 homes and 3,000 vehicles were destroyed or damaged.

Figures released by the state insurance commissioner's office last week put the damage at over \$3 billion. That figure is certain to rise.

For the first time, this year's fires, driven by up-to-50-mph winds, engulfed urban areas, such as the city of Santa Rosa, where the Coffey Park neighborhood was reduced to ashes after the flames jumped six lanes of Highway 101.

Homeowners and renters, still in makeshift accommodation, are currently tackling the onerous task of cleaning up, attempting to retrieve any of their belongings that may have survived and applying for insurance and what federal assistance is available.

California has declared a public health emergency in the fire area. Mobile homes that were incinerated in Santa Rosa were found to have contained asbestos. Freon from air conditioners and heavy metals such as arsenic, copper and lead pose health risks throughout

the area as well.

Recent rain—and the rainfall to come with the approach of winter—risks carrying the hazardous waste down into waterways, and even into water treatment plants, downstream of destroyed forests and charred neighborhoods.

Some homes have been designated toxic waste sites, further complicating the job for residents trying to salvage belongings.

There are residents who face even more obstacles to regaining their homes and jobs. These are the undocumented workers, who form the core workforce of the main industries in the region—hospitality, tourism and the wineries. It is estimated that some 28,000 undocumented adults and children lived in the region worst affected by the flames.

These workers do not qualify for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) aid. One of the many details required on the FEMA application forms is a social security number, denied to these residents, some of whom have lived in the area for up to 18 years. Children of these families who are American citizens do qualify for federal aid, but there is a fear that if the family seeks aid, other family members will be detained and deported.

This fear also kept many out of the shelters set up for residents who lost their homes or were ordered to evacuate endangered areas. Members of the National Guard were stationed at the shelters.

In the days following the outbreak of the fires, dozens of these families slept in cars and on beaches along the California coast.

Officials have said it will take years for the region to recover, socially and economically. Judging by the experience of residents in the wake of other recent disasters in the United States and its territories, that

may be an understatement.

In Houston, recently flooded after the passage of Hurricane Harvey, the disaster is worsening the level of social inequality in the region.

NBC reported on October 23 that the poor in the Houston area are likely to fall further into poverty and homelessness while the wealthy are moving ahead with rebuilding.

Those who have been receiving temporary assistance from FEMA over the last two months now find themselves struggling to regain a foothold in their lives.

“Displaced renters have found themselves reliant on the whims of landlords or the generosity of friends,” the NBC report stated. “Homeowners without flood insurance are in a similar bind, while those who have it are waiting for their claims to go through. Some are maxing out their credit cards, or moving back into damaged houses.

“In some prosperous neighborhoods,” the report added, “certain homeowners aren’t bothering to wait for their insurance checks—if they had flood insurance at all—and are paying their contractors up front.”

An even more extreme situation exists in Puerto Rico, devastated by Hurricane Maria in late September. Most residents have been told they will be without power until January or February, with some of those in the outlying areas having to wait until spring or summer, according to the Army Corps of Engineers.

The hardship experienced by people in these situations can become permanent. In New Orleans, flooded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, residents were temporarily removed to neighboring states, far from their homes and jobs. Twelve years later, many are still displaced. While some have managed to start again in their new location, those who would prefer to return face expenses most people cannot meet. There is a lack of affordable housing in the city and new safety standards for elevating homes. Some people will never be able to return.

In Northern California, those who manage to overcome all the obstacles to rebuilding may encounter a further problem: insurance rate hikes.

In a press conference on Tuesday, state insurance commissioner Dave Jones warned that in the wake of the disaster insurers were likely to reevaluate the risk that wildfires pose to structures previously considered low-risk to such threats.

“I am concerned the fire we just experienced is not an anomaly and may represent a new normal,” Jones said.



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