

The Paradise Fire ..One Year Later

by
Mike Prero

Paradise, CA, was home to about 26,800 people in 2010. As of April, its population was 2,034. The Paradise Fire (the Camp Fire) killed 85 people as it burned across 153,000 acres for more than two weeks last November. About 14,000 residences were destroyed, and 90% of the town's original inhabitants are gone, the vast majority of which will probably never return. The fire was the worst wild-land blaze in state history, destroying nearly 19,000 structures. In May, the state's fire agency, Cal Fire, ruled that PG&E equipment started the blaze.

[Many thanks to George Cosentini, CA, for the graphics pictured here]



There are thousands of lawsuits pending against Pacific Gas & Electric, which has already paid out over \$1 billion and filed for bankruptcy. The company provides natural gas and electric service to approximately 16 million people throughout a 70,000-square-mile service area in northern and central California, and most of those 16 million customers are worried that they're going to end up paying for the fire through increased rates. California already has the highest electricity rates in the country, primarily due to regulations and mandates from Sacramento. And, P,G,&E's rates are higher than most, if not all, other utilities in the state.

In March, the first permit was issued for rebuilding, and, as of July, about 150 businesses, including a few coffee shops, a doctor's office and car repair shops, have reopened. So has the Paradise Alliance Church, one of the few large buildings left in town that now hosts everything from town council and irrigation district board meetings to comedy nights, Thursday night dinners and FEMA meetings.

But, those that have returned to Paradise are facing a daunting array of problems. Many have had to negotiate with their insurance companies to get money for things such as landscaping, new appliances and sheds that burned down, some only to find that their insurance companies will not help pay for a water filtration system or a new water tank.

What comes out of the tap now isn't safe to drink. Much of the town's water was contaminated with the cancer-causing chemical benzene after the fire melted many of the water system's meters and pipes. Authorities are distributing free bottled water for drinking, cooking, making ice and brushing teeth. The Paradise Irrigation District has a \$53 million recovery plan to rebuild the town's water system, but it will take until 2021.

Nearly every person affected by the fire, whether they lost their home or not, also is absorbing the shock of rising premiums to insure their homes, and many can't afford the increases. [https://www.mercurynews.com/2019/07/07/when-will-this-end-months-after-camp-fire-stress-mounts-for-those-who-returned-to-paradise/] Plus, property owners across the state may be facing increasing rates as insurance companies examine their losses, and, as a result of the fire and its aftermath, utility companies have begun shutting off power to areas whenever they suspect incoming weather conditions may threaten power lines. Things have changed in California...for the worse.

Homes leveled by the Camp Fire line the Ridgewood Mobile Home Park retirement community in Paradise, Calif.

