

# California Wildfires Inflict More Devastation

Among recent natural disasters striking the U.S. are devastating wildfires that torched California's wine country, destroyed thousands of homes and killed more than 40 people, report Dennis J Bernstein and Miguel Gavilan Molina.

By Dennis J Bernstein and Miguel Gavilan Molina

The Tubbs neighborhood in Santa Rosa, Sonoma County, one of the hardest hit by the recent fires in Northern California, looked like some of the worst bombed-out and scorched neighborhoods in Syria with little left standing other than a few red brick chimneys and the burnt-out shells of cars and heavy metal appliances.

According to CalFire, the three largest fires in California's Wine Country – the Tubbs, Atlas and Nuns – have burned more than 182,000 acres in Sonoma and Napa counties. The total number of houses and businesses destroyed is estimated at more than 5,700 buildings with a death count of more than 40 people. In the Tubbs Fire alone, 17 people died, making it among the deadliest fires in the state's history.

Pacifica's Flashpoints program broadcast live from the Arlene Francis Center in Santa Rosa with interviews with Santa Rosa City Council Member Julie Combs and Sonoma County Supervisor James Gore.

Dennis Bernstein: Let me first begin with you, Councilwoman Julie Combs. ... Let's start on a personal note. We were talking before we went on air and I was thinking it must be horrifying to have a tree fall on your house. But then you said...

Julie Combs: I'd rather have a tree than a fire. I was very lucky. I am okay but my heart is with my whole city and my whole city is still recovering.

Dennis Bernstein: Tell us some of the stories you have heard.

Julie Combs: In my spare time I am also a ham radio operator. Sunday night I was listening to fire engines being called. The calls were coming in so quickly and it was clear the fire was moving fast and spreading rapidly. I kept listening till about 3:00 in the morning when it became clear we had to do massive evacuations. We got shelters open early that morning. It was shocking how rapidly that fire moved. It moved faster than men could run.

Dennis Bernstein: Say something about the level of desperation people have been

going through.

Julie Combs: We are estimating about 15,000 displaced. Santa Rosa has lost about 5% of its housing stock. Even before this, we had just a 1% vacancy rate for rentals. We had quite a number of people in shelters but most people found hotel arrangements or family to go to. A lot of people went out of area to stay with family. Many went to campgrounds at the coast. All of this is only going to work in the short term.

Schools will be closed until sometime next week. They have to do an excellent job of removing the toxic elements that have been in the air. The other problem is that hundreds of teachers have been displaced and are still without housing.

Miguel Gavilan Molina: The Spanish-speaking communities have special concerns. A lot of folks that did go out to the coast went because they were afraid of immigration.

Julie Combs: Initially they were afraid to go to shelters. It took us a while to get the word out that we were not going to ask any questions about documentation.

I had a fabulous experience at one of the shelters which illustrates how a community can come together around a disaster. I went to one shelter in a predominantly Latino area. The school gymnasium had about 150 people there. It received people from nursing homes, it received children with developmental difficulties, a lot of people with medical needs. Kids from a Polynesian dance class were performing. In another room, people had volunteered to offer massages. Outside a motorcycle club cooked a barbecue dinner for everyone in the place. So while it has been a great hardship, as we go forward into what will be a much harder time with rebuilding and clean up, I hope we can hold on to how well we pulled together as a community.

Dennis Bernstein: James Gore is vice chair of the Sonoma Board of Supervisors.

James Gore: It is a great opportunity to be here, because we are at a crucial point now between crisis and rebuild and recovery. This fire didn't distinguish, it affected everyone. In my district we have lost core housing stock, something like three to four thousand houses gone. These are teachers, workers, carpenters, farm workers. These were not high-income houses up in the hills. We need to make sure that people stay there, that when we rebuild it isn't for second homes in the Wine Country. We have to take care of our workers, even if it means changing laws, changing jurisdictions, even changing things at the state level.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you share with us how this disastrous event has

ultimately changed your life?

James Gore: My cousin and his family will probably be living with us for a long time because their house is gone. Two of my childhood homes are gone. My step sister lost her home as well. I am driving all around my community, trying to evacuate certain areas and at the same time repopulate other areas. And I look at the back of my car and see basically everything that is important to me. Every time I put on the brakes I can hear my wedding picture slide across the back seat. Because I am ready to go with my kids, too, at any moment.

Someone said to me the other day on the street, "The way the city is rebounding reminds me of the Santa Rosa I grew up in." This is a great equalizer and it is a huge shock to our system that we need to make use of. We tend to get complacent and focus on what I call "hashtag first-world" issues. We need to take this as a mandate to go forward and do what we need to in terms of housing, watershed protection, economic equality.

I feel that we have to seize the moment to prove that we did not run for local office to be professional politicians. As public servants, we must respond to the needs in our community. We need to understand this as an opportunity to rally and create a movement. We have talked about how the city and the country can work together. Well, it is not theoretical anymore.

Miguel Gavilan Molina: One thing I am concerned about is that winter is just a month and a half away. The rains are coming. Are these evacuation centers going to be able to keep people there for the next four or five months?

James Gore: The future is a question more than an answer right now. Let's start with the environment. I was an appointee in charge of conservation in the Obama administration. I visited communities in Colorado and Arizona where flooding after a fire caused double the damage caused by the fire. We are trying to bring in state and federal people to work with local landowners to prepare the lands for rain. Last year we had historic rains. Whether you believe in climate change or not, we are clearly dealing with a new system.

Then look at the economy. We are seeing small business people who haven't had any business for the past two weeks and they don't expect to have much business for the next couple months. We are raising money for our undocumented community, because they are not going to qualify for FEMA. Finally, where are people going to stay? This is where the city and county are going to have to rally. We have to identify county pieces of land, city pieces of land, private land where we can put up modular units to keep people in our towns.

Julie Combs: The fires are still not 100% contained. Fires continue within the

areas of containment. At any moment nature could trick us. We could get a sudden wind. It is possible we could get another fire before the end of the year. We are in the process of both putting out an active fire and re-entering areas where fire damage has occurred. Traditionally, repopulation takes place after the fire has been eliminated. We are trying to get people back in their homes as quickly and as safely as we can.

James Gore: We are at the point right now where we have to figure things out as we go. We are in adaptive management mode. I tell people that the only thing perfect is our relentless, imperfect progress. This is not the first time this has happened. I was talking recently with Supervisor Rob Brown who led the response to the Valley fire two years ago. He told me that when we are rebuilding we have to remember that these are not reconstruction sites, these are sacred sites. These are places where people brought their kids home for the first time. The silver lining is that we are not going to let the systems hold us back from solutions. We have been talking about system inertia for a long time. Well, now is our chance to wipe it out.

Julie Combs: Some of the barriers that existed between the city and the country have disappeared. This has truly been a joint effort. The first question I asked FEMA when they came was how soon we could get FEMA housing support. We wanted FEMA to be thinking more creatively in what they provide to us and how we receive it, so that we aren't stuck in the future with housing we don't want and instead get the housing we need.

Dennis Bernstein: Dealing with FEMA can be tricky.

James Gore: In our initial conversation with FEMA we made clear to them that we wanted not just to rebuild but to build capacity at the same time. They agreed that it didn't make sense to buy a bunch of mobile units from somewhere else, that we should use our workforce here to rebuild. We want to have everyone, both union and non-union, on the ground building capacity, using this as an opportunity to get things done.

There were certain areas in my district that were not connected up to the sewer system. We are looking to FEMA to help us ensure that everyone is connected to the sewer so we have less groundwater damage in the future. We don't want to repeat the horror of empty mobile homes that we saw after Katrina.

I am cautiously optimistic because I believe that we have the capacity to push, to mobilize and get it done. My heart goes out to some of the other communities that don't have the abundance of resources that Sonoma County has. In other communities, the resources are indeed scarce.

Julie Combs: As dollars come in, it is important that we use them locally. That we are not bringing in a lot of outside labor to solve problems that we have the ability to solve here. I think it is important that we are paying a prevailing wage, ensuring that people who are building houses can live in them. I also want to make sure that people really understand what FEMA has to offer them. Federal assistance is up to \$32,000 for loss of residence. There are hotel costs, costs of replacing tools, childcare. There are funds available for these things.

A lot of people assume that if the parents are not documented, they cannot get FEMA aid. If there is one person in the family with documents, the whole family is eligible for FEMA funding. If you are a dreamer with a social security number, that counts. Another thing people worry about is that, when you fill out your visa form, you have to say whether you have received government assistance. FEMA does not count as one of the government assistance programs.

James Gore: A lot of this stuff has already been figured out. We have to make sure we take the best practices from the Valley fire in Lake County, from Santa Barbara, from Monterey, Trinity County, San Diego. I was recently at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds and the private sector engineering contractors association are getting people who are already certified and certifying others. The operating engineers on the union side have 300 people ready to deploy. Right now it is all about getting those contracts out in the most efficient manner.

And, as Julie said, it is crucial that we pay good wages. We have to infuse into our local economy. Julie and I have failed if all of these jobs go to people outside our community and all these people here on a thin wire get displaced.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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