

## **Not My Fault: Losing everything most dear**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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I have visited places where everything has been destroyed. Whether it's a village in Papua New Guinea, a resort town in Peru or a city in Japan, there are eerie similarities. You see the traces of what was – a sign flapping in the wind, a surviving wall or foundation and the odd surviving bits of lives destroyed like a soccer ball, toy or kitchen pan. It's not just a visual assault. All the senses are distorted – sounds, smells, the bits of debris that the winds carry on to your skin. But I have only been a visitor to these places – assessing impacts, and looking at factors that contributed to impacts. I have had the luxury of leaving and going home when my work was done.

It has not been my community that was assaulted. For my friends, colleagues and everyone else who lived in or near Paradise in the wake of the Camp Fire or those in Southern California hit by the Woolsey and Hill fires, the disaster continues. For the survivors and the people who live nearby, every day in unfamiliar surroundings is an ever-present reminder of all that was lost.

The Camp Fire is now the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California history. As I write, 48 people are confirmed dead, surpassing the 27 lives lost in the 1933 Griffith Park fire. Over 7600 homes and 260 commercial structures have been lost, easily topping the 5500 structures destroyed in Santa Rosa's Tubbs fire last year. More than 300,000 Californians are currently under evacuation orders. Over 100 people are still unaccounted for, full containment is not expected until the end of the month and loss estimates are likely to go higher.

Before November 8th, Paradise, the second largest city in Butte County, was the same size as Eureka. The population of 27,000 included a mix of families, college students, people working in tourist and resource businesses, and retirees. To get a feel for the scale of the devastation, imagine every commercial building in Eureka burned to the ground and at least four out of every five houses gone. The fire scorched areas well beyond the Paradise city limits. Over 200 square miles have burned to date, forcing the evacuation of 52,000 people.

It is the early days of the Camp Fire and neither the full magnitude or causes are known, but there are two emerging threads as to why it is so destructive: physical conditions and community vulnerability.

Heat, wind, fuel and dry landscapes create firestorm conditions. The National Weather Service had issued Red Flag warnings, the weather conditions that make wildfire likely, for much of the state the day before the fires broke out. The warming climate has exacerbated the wildfire threat. Twenty historic California wildfires have exceeded 140,000 acres in size. One occurred in 1932, four between 1970 and 2000 and 15 since 2000, including this year's Mendocino Complex, the largest to ever hit the state.

Communities have also become more vulnerable. People have moved into the wildland-urban interface, the transition zone between developed and wild areas. Paradise is a case in point. In 1960, the population was just over 8,000. In the next twenty years, the population had increased nearly three-fold, largely by an influx of retirees. While Eureka and Paradise are similar in size, the demographics are very different. The median age in Eureka is 36, nearly identical to the state as a whole. In Paradise, the median age was 50.

Evacuation is the only way to survive wildfire. People need to get information quickly, understand the threat and act as fast as they can and threatened areas. Communities like Paradise have not developed with evacuation in mind. Roads are narrow with only one road access in and out in many areas. The situation is exacerbated by recent arrivals less familiar with the fire threat and a dispersed and older population that is more difficult to evacuate.

I hope that my colleagues at CSU Chico can study the factors that influenced evacuation from the Camp Fire – how were people notified, how long did it take them to respond and what difficulties did they encounter. A better understanding of evacuation can help in the rebuilding of Paradise and surrounding communities. Rebuilding offers an opportunity to build a more resilient community with improved evacuation access and fire resistant design such as using less combustible materials and vegetation setbacks.

Rebuilding is still a long way off. The immediate problem is the care and shelter of the people who have lost their homes and their possessions. Money is the greatest need as it can be quickly directed to changing local priorities. I'm planning to donate to the North Valley Foundation

<https://www.nvcf.org/>, Butte County's philanthropy organization that has the regional knowledge and connections in to assist families and businesses. I will also send a contribution to the North State Food Bank <https://www.buttecaa.com/north-state-food-bank/> as people already economically stressed are always the most heavily hit by disaster.

My third check will go towards assisting CSU Chico students – <https://www.csuchico.edu/campfire/>. It's hard enough to make ends meet when you are a student, and losing your residence, books and clothing shouldn't mean an end to your education.

Preparedness tip of the week: Make it a habit to check your regional National Weather Service forecast office for alerts and warnings every day. On the North Coast, visit the Eureka NWS Forecast office website at [weather.gov/eureka](http://weather.gov/eureka) or call (707) 443-7062 for the current NOAA Weather Radio loop. Weather Apps on your phone or computer won't reliably give you details of potentially hazardous conditions such as Red Flag warnings or sneaker wave alerts.

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