

WINE COUNTRY FIRES

OUTLOOK GRIM AS BURNING GOES ON

Fires from page A1

Sonoma County Sheriff Rob Giordano said, "That is the reality of part of it."

The number of people killed in the fires has already surpassed the toll from the Oct. 20, 1991 Oakland Hills Fire, making it among the deadliest clusters of wildland fires in state history.

Of the 31 dead, 17 were found in Sonoma County, eight in Mendocino County, four in Yuba County and two in Napa County.

The search teams moved into the burned-out neighborhoods early Thursday, targeting locations where those reported missing might be. By afternoon, they had recovered two bodies.

"Our goal is to recover the bodies, then document it like any unattended death," said Lt. Paul Liskey, who coordinates emergency services for the Alameda County Sheriff's Office.

Liskey is part of a team of 30 deputies from Alameda, Sonoma and Monterey counties working the recovery. "It's very emotional, it's tough, it's hard work," he said.

Ten bodies recovered in the wreckage have been identified. The youngest of those victims was 57. Most of the others were in their 70s and 80s, Giordano said.

The advanced ages of many of the deceased corroborated the suspicions of several survivors who described harrowing escapes without prior warnings and were skeptical that their elderly neighbors could have made it out.

Giordano said it would be unrealistic to think there wouldn't be more victims. Of the 1,100 people reported missing in Sonoma County since Monday, nearly 400 are still unaccounted for, he said.

The spreading fires have destroyed up to 3,500 homes, businesses and other structures. In Santa Rosa, 2,834 homes, 410,000 square feet of commercial space, a new fire station in Fountain Grove and two sewage lift stations were incinerated, city officials said.

Two of the biggest fires — the Tubbs Fire and the Atlas Fire — began Sunday in Napa County, and within hours gusts of up to 70 mph had blown flames through rural and urban neighborhoods, consuming businesses, hotels and wineries.

As of Thursday, 21 active fires, all but one in the northern part of the state, have charred 191,437 acres, or roughly 300 square miles, since Sunday.

And, with more high winds and low humidity continuing, the situation isn't expected to get any better for the 8,000 firefighters struggling to stop the fires from spreading. Rick Caneppa, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said north to northeast winds of up to 30 miles per hour are expected Friday and Saturday in northern Sonoma and Napa counties, with gusts reaching 50 to 60 mph.

"What this means is the fires are going to continue to burn erratically," said Chief Ken Pimlott, the director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, known as Cal Fire. "We are a long way from being done with this."

Pimlott said the cities of Calistoga, and Sonoma and Lake County's Geyserville and Midtown are in the most danger.

But as the flames move on, the search and recovery teams move in.

The first order of business is determine a missing person's habits — maybe they never leave the house without their car or they're always home — and then run through those leads until all ideas are exhausted.

You take a report of this person missing, the detective starts working it, making phone calls," Giordano said. "It's pretty quick, depending on the family members' knowledge. We can figure out, 'OK, there is no other place to look,' and we're forced to go to the house."

The recovery work can be perilous. On Carriage Court in the Larkfield-Wikiup neighborhood of Sonoma County,

harmless household items turned to hazards after the Tubbs Fire leveled every home on the street — a bookshelf became a mess of wood and nails, bottles became glass shards and the rubble and ash can be hot, up to 2,000 degrees.

"We have nails, hot spots, it's just complete and total devastation," Liskey said. "We use probing sticks to make sure we're not going to step into a basement we can't see."

The remains, when found, are often in an unrecognizable state.

"We are most likely to only find a large bone, like a femur, if the body is exposed for a period of time to the extreme heat," Liskey said. "It is case-by-case because if a body is covered or protected from the extreme heat, it may be recognizable."

The recovery work is difficult and emotionally traumatic.

"We do this with heavy hearts ... to bring closure to these people," Liskey said. "We can't imagine what they're going through."

But even after the remains are found, making an identification is a long and difficult process.

Investigators have used dental records, fingerprints, tattoos and the serial numbers on artificial hips, knees or other medical implants. For others, identification will require DNA samples and weeks or months of waiting for the lab results.

"We have found bodies that were almost completely intact and we have found bodies that were nothing but ash and bones," Giordano said. "We will treat these remains with the utmost respect and get these remains back to their loved ones."

As the winds pick up, fire officials are also concerned about new fires, which is why they are calling in even more troops and equipment from agencies around the United States and the federal government.

"This is not about only the fires we have," Pimlott said. "We are constantly anticipating fires that may come."

The deadliest conflagration, the Tubbs Fire, grew to more than 34,200 acres Thursday after laying bare an area stretching from Calistoga to Santa Rosa. With 17 killed, it is now the third-deadliest wildfire in modern state history.

But beleaguered firefighters have at least made some progress — the Tubbs Fire is now 10 percent contained, meaning a firebreak has been built around a portion of the burn area.

A harrowing fight is also being waged against the Atlas Fire, which has consumed more than 43,700 acres, including dozens of homes and wineries northeast of the city of Napa. It was only 3 percent contained.

Forensics experts are searching for the causes of the fires, and Pimlott said all possibilities will be looked at, including whether power lines downed by high winds sparked some of the blazes. Assigning blame now, he said, would be "all speculation, all rumor. The facts will come out when the investigation is done."

The California Public Utilities Commission sent a letter Thursday telling Pacific Gas and Electric Co. to preserve all evidence that could be connected to the wildfires, including broken power poles, electrical conductors, emails and documents concerning the utility's tree-trimming program.

The ongoing disaster has changed the very fabric of life in the now empty towns normally filled with wine-sipping and spa-going tourists. Tens of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes in historic mission communities, Wine Country towns and a patchwork of neighborhoods from Sonoma to Santa Rosa.

Some 4,800 people were packed into 42 emergency shelters in the state after the wine-tasting town of Calistoga was evacuated. A hilly neighborhood just 1 mile from the historic Sonoma Plaza and its famous Spanish mission was also evacuated.

The Nuns Fire, in Sonoma and Napa counties, has combined with the Norrbom Fire, and is burning along Highway 12 north of Glen Ellen. The joined fires have consumed nearly 15,000 acres and are 3 percent contained.

The Partrick Fire west of Napa has burned almost 11,000 acres and is 2 percent contained. The Adobe Fire near Kenwood is 8,000 acres and the Pressley Fire east of Rohnert Park is close to 500 acres with only 1 percent containment.

In Mendocino County, the Redwood Complex Fire has burned 32,100 acres and is 5 percent contained.

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Our focus is on getting resources where they're needed most, not pulling them away for photo ops with the governor," Brown's spokesman Evan Westrup said.

On Thursday, prior to signing nine bills in Sacramento aimed at improving the lives of women and children, Brown opened with his concern about the fires

across the state.

"We are working to get fire trucks and airplanes and personnel to all the areas we can," Brown said. "We aren't in any way finished. Some places are beginning to be contained. But the fires are burning and the winds can come up, they aren't as calm as we would like them to be. The next couple days are very serious for D.C."

In Washington, D.C., Congress approved \$19 billion in disaster relief funding to address hurricanes and fire emergencies, said Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, including a last-minute \$1 billion increase to help with recovery from the Northern California fires.

The primary driver of fires is huge abundance of grasses that grew tall during winter rains and then dried out under searing heat during the summer. That, combined with low humidity and Santa Ana-like winds blowing toward the sea is a recipe for catastrophic fire, experts say.

The offshore winds in Northern California, which almost always come in the fall, are known as Diablo winds. They fed the devastating Oakland Hills Fire.

California Highway Patrol



Paul Chinn / The Chronicle



Noah Berger / Special to The Chronicle



Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Above: A home on Skyfarm Drive in Santa Rosa appears to be undamaged by Monday's firestorm, although it was different story for a burned-out minivan parked in the driveway.

Far left: Ned and Vivien MacDonald on Bennett Valley Road near Santa Rosa post a sign thanking firefighters and police officers. Part of their 450 acres were charred, but they credit firefighters with saving their home.

Left: Neighbors gather along Old Vineyard Road to watch the progress of the blaze as the Partick Fire continues to burn slowly east of Sonoma.

Known fire victim locations as of 6:30 p.m., Thurs. The death toll from the Northern California fires has risen to 31. Here is a list of known locations of 16 victims.

Cascade Fire

① 1 victim; Lone Tree Way, Loma Rica

**Tubbs Fire**

② 1 victim; Mountain Home Ranch Road, Santa Rosa

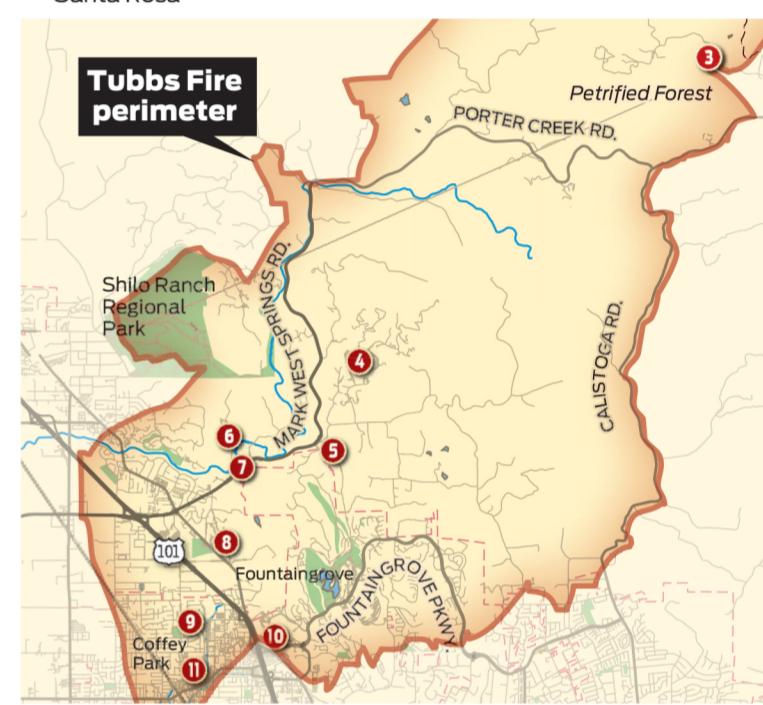
③ 1 victim; Crystal Court, Santa Rosa

④ 2 victims; Mark West Springs Road, Larkfield

⑤ 2 victims; Angela Drive, Larkfield

⑥ 2 victims; Sundown Trail, Santa Rosa

⑦ 1 victim; Hemlock Street, Santa Rosa

**Atlas Fire**

⑧ 2 victims; Charles and Sara Rippey, Westgate Drive, Napa

**LeRoy and Donna Halbur, both 80, could not flee blaze**

By Michael Cabanatuan

LeRoy Halbur and his wife, Donna, had been married for more than 50 years when they died in the early hours of the Tubbs Fire as they tried to flee the fast-moving flames. They were both 80.

Mr. Halbur was a retired, longtime accountant for Coding Enterprises, a commercial and real estate development company in Sonoma County. He also helped found the St. Vincent de Paul, a Catholic charitable organization, in the county in 1968 and had been on its board ever since. He was also president of the Resurrection Catholic Church in Santa Rosa.

Tibbetts said Mr. Halbur's compassion and expertise will be missed, especially with so much devastation and need in Sonoma County.

"We could use Leroy right now to help us make decisions on how to invest our time and resources. That's for sure," he said.

should invest and spend its money to best serve the poor.

"He has been involved with every aspect of our organization: Who we should serve, how we should serve," Tibbetts said.

Mr. Halbur had a reputation for being a straight shooter, and he was astute with finances, but he also had a great sense of humor and a smile that reflected his compassion, Tibbetts said.

"He was a very warm man," Tibbetts said. "When he smiled, you could see the warmth very clearly. His compassion to help the poor drove him."

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"We could use Leroy right now to help us make decisions on how to invest our time and resources. That's for sure," he said.

On Facebook, Bonnie Alicia Berkeley, a family friend, recalled Mr. Halbur.

"LeRoy always had a twinkle in his blue eyes, and was a calm & kind man," she posted. "Unimaginable ending. Love to all those suffering, surviving and helping."

Recently, Mr. Halbur was spending more time at home, caring for his ailing wife, Tibbetts said.

The couple died in their car, parked inside their garage, when it was inundated with flames.

They are survived by a son, Dave, and were grandparents.

San Francisco Chronicle staff writer Marissa Lang contributed to this report.

Michael Cabanatuan is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: mcabanatuan@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @ctuan