

WINE COUNTRY FIRES

TAKING STOCK OF THE DAMAGE



Noah Berger / Special to The Chronicle

Search-and-rescue workers comb through the Journey’s End Mobile Home Park in Santa Rosa. One official believes three to five people died there.

PG&E: Despite the utility’s high-cost prevention efforts, lines seen as possible cause

By David R. Baker

Last year, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. inspected 171,057 utility poles and chopped down 236,000 trees near its power lines, essential steps for preventing wildfires. PG&E inspectors flew over all 114,000 miles of the utility’s electricity distribution wires criss-crossing Northern and Central California, as well as 18,000 miles of high-voltage transmission lines. They used lidar, the laser version of radar, to check for tree branches growing too close to the wires, branches that could brush up against the lines and cause a spark. Other sensors deployed from the air checked for trees that might be dying, or that already had been killed by drought. In all, the company spent \$198 million in 2016 on “vegetation management.” But those efforts and that money — all of it coming from PG&E’s customers — may not have been enough. California fire officials are looking into whether PG&E electric lines and power poles, toppled by Sunday night’s windstorm, played a role in trigger-

Utility continues on A12

Inside the shelters: Evacuees endure the wait — to return home or to get a fresh start

By Jill Tucker and J.K. Dineen

The green canvas cots are inches apart, covered with white blankets emblazoned with the American Red Cross logo. Mealtimes are posted on large pieces of paper on the wall. The medical area is in the front corner, opposite a snack bar. Children’s toys and games sit on the other end of Grace Pavilion at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds. A week ago, the hall in Santa Rosa was full of wine and art for the Harvest Festival. On Friday, it was home to hundreds of evacuees, one of 43 shelters that have opened across the North Bay since the deadly fires ignited. It is a place of heartbreaking loss and heartening sacrifice, but five days on, the question echoes louder across the cavernous building: How long will I be here? The question is difficult to answer. “We’re here until I can figure out what’s going to

Shelters continues on A9

35
deaths from fires throughout Northern California

330
square miles blackened by 17 fires burning statewide

90,000
people evacuated statewide

9,000
firefighters battling fires across the state

500
fire engines, 73 helicopters and 30 air tankers being utilized

5,700
homes and commercial facilities destroyed in Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino, Solano, Lake, Nevada, Butte, Calaveras, Shasta, and Yuba counties.

More Wine Country fire coverage on A7-15. Updates online at sfchronicle.com/north-bay-fires



Making headway: Crews are corralling biggest blazes as human, property tolls rise

By Peter Fimrite, Kimberly Veklerov and Jenna Lyons

Signs of progress cheered battle-weary firefighters Friday after their multipronged attack using helicopters, air tankers and hand crews significantly corralled the deadly fires spreading across Northern California. Firebreaks are now encircling nearly half of each of the two biggest fires in the Wine Country as crews shield the cities of Napa, Calistoga, Geyserville, Sonoma and Santa Rosa. The progress was tempered by a rising death toll and new estimates of the destruction: Thirty-five were known to be dead and 5,700 structures destroyed as of Friday night. Two of the fires in California have been contained and five others burned into each other, combining forces. There are now 17 fires burning statewide, including 15 in Northern California, which have blackened 222,000 acres, or about 330 square miles. The battle, however, remained far from over as weather forecasters issued red-flag warnings from 5 p.m. Friday through 11 p.m. Saturday, signaling the expected return of the dangerous Diablo winds that

Fires continues on A10

Warnings: Grand juries told 3 hard-hit counties long ago about firefighting concerns

By Kimberly Veklerov and Joaquin Palomino

Long before infernos hit Wine Country and other parts of Northern California this week, grand juries in three affected counties raised concerns about poorly maintained roads that could impede access to rural areas hit by disaster, difficulties recruiting and training volunteer firefighters and budget deficits that were “depleting” fire department reserves. It’s unclear whether these deficiencies, seen in Napa, Sonoma and Butte counties, impacted initial local responses to the deadly wildfires that are projected to cost billions of dollars. Some experts say the flames spread by unrelenting winds, low humidity and years of drought-parched vegetation were impossible to prepare for or predict under any circumstances. “We’re fighting two forces of nature: fire and wind,” said Michael McLaughlin, California director

Warnings continues on A10