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WINE COUNTRY FIRES

FROM A SPARK TO AN INFERNO

Blazes quickly turned 'unstoppable' as North Bay slept

By Kevin Fagan

His crew had just finished putting out a grass fire when Santa Rosa Fire Chief Tony Gossner's radio crackled at about 10 p.m.

"We've got a fire at Safari West and it's coming our way," the dispatcher said.

The wildlife preserve set in Sonoma County's thickly wooded hills was just 6 miles away, and Gossner knew

that it was a uniquely dangerous spot. The winds this Sunday night were stiff, and parched grass and tinder-dry trees filled the valleys leading straight to town. Gossner drove up a hill to take a look.

Off in the distance, as he crested the slope, was an orange glow, angry and wide.

"My God," he thought. "We're in trouble."

Hours continues on A12



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Sebastopol firefighters keep a close watch on a fire in the Oakmont neighborhood in Santa Rosa, which suffered the greatest damage to homes and businesses.

Sonoma: Hundreds flee as windblown flames ignite homes near town square

By Catherine Ho, Kevin Fagan, Hamed Aleazziz and Peter Fimrite

Erratic winds whipped up flames Saturday, igniting several homes in the town of Sonoma and forcing the evacuations of hundreds of people who, until now, had escaped the terrible wrath of the wildfires that have so far killed 40 people and destroyed 5,700 structures in the Wine Country and beyond.

Several homes burned just east of the historic town square in Sonoma as the gusty winds that caused so much havoc earlier this week reappeared before dawn, forcing firefighters to scramble to beat back numerous flare-ups.

"There's a pretty good firefight going on in the field right now," said Steve Crawford, the operations section chief for the California Department

Sonoma continues on A15



Paul Chinn / The Chronicle
Charred wine barrels at Santa Rosa's Paradise Ridge Winery.

Wine industry: Vintners optimistic over long term, but big questions remain

By Esther Mobley

Many of the most powerful images coming out of the Wine Country fires last week depicted the wine industry as charred, its future threatened.

A generations-old winery engulfed in flames and reduced to rubble. Symmetrical rows of grapevines, backlit by a bright line of approaching fire.

Uncertainty and anxiety grip the wine community. And as the magnitude of the damage becomes clearer and missing loved ones are located, attention will turn to the scale of the devastation to the pastoral region's multibillion-dollar wine industry.

No one would compare the loss of wine with the loss of life. But wine is these communities' lifeblood — economic, cultural and otherwise. As

Wineries continues on A16