

# San Francisco Chronicle

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## WINE COUNTRY FIRES

# DISASTER IS RELENTLESS



Elijah Nouvelage / Special to the Chronicle

Above: The remains of the homes in Coffey Park in Santa Rosa — among the neighborhoods that were burned to the ground — are seen from the air.  
Below: Brian Gilman displays 200-year-old tea cups that he found while digging through the rubble of his mother's home in Santa Rosa.

**Death toll:** Count reaches 17 — ‘a fluid number’ that authorities expect to rise

By Lizzie Johnson, Trisha Thadani, Melody Gutierrez and Peter Fimrite

Thousands of firefighters fought the aggressive march of wind-whipped wildfires that raged out of control Tuesday in Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino and Yuba counties — and the death toll rose to 17 as authorities began the grim task of excavating for bodies amid up to 3,000 ruined homes and businesses.

The horror of the disaster was underscored by a desperate effort by people to find relatives who have not been heard from, a problem complicated by downed cell phone towers. In Sonoma County alone, officials had 183 reports of missing people.

“It’s devastating,” said Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, who toured the fire-scarred region by helicopter. “I fully expect this will be the worst fire disaster in California history.”

The death toll — the number rose by seven Tuesday — is “a fluid number” that is expected to continue increasing, officials said. In Sonoma County, where most of the dead have been

Fires continues on A10

**Rebuilding:** Don’t rush recovery, Oakland hills survivors recommend

By Kevin Fagan

It will all come in waves: Anguish over loss. Frustration with insurance companies and building contractors. Fear.

That’s what’s in store for months to come for those savaged by the fires ripping through Wine Country and beyond this week. None of their neighborhoods will look the same again for years.

But, eventually, homes, schools and businesses will sprout back in what are now smoking ash fields. And as those who survived the devastating Oakland hills blaze of Oct. 20, 1991, say — usually with a heavy sigh — life will move on and get back to something resembling normal.

Rebuilding continues on A8

**Santa Rosa:** Voracious blaze churned through city with stunning speed

By Jill Tucker, Lizzie Johnson, Joaquin Palomino and Kurtis Alexander

The winds were so fierce as a storm of fires kicked off in Wine Country that one of furniture-maker Paul Block’s special wine-barrel chairs — all 50 pounds of it — flew off his shop’s rooftop display in Calistoga. When he spotted flames after 9 p.m. Sunday, he was scared.

Fifteen miles to the west, on the north edge of Santa Rosa, most residents were heading to bed. They had no idea that, within a few hours, the inferno now branded the Tubbs Fire would race through canyons and over hills, cross a county line, jump a freeway, devour 550 homes and 21 businesses, and kill at least 11 people.

On Tuesday, residents and public officials were taking stock of those crucial hours before dawn, marveling at the fury of the blaze while also wondering whether enough had been done — to anticipate the fire’s movement, to dispatch firefighters, and to notify people in dense sections of Sonoma County’s largest city before it

Santa Rosa continues on A8



Guy Wathen / The Chronicle

**17**

deaths from fires throughout Northern California

**3,000**

high-end estimate of ruined homes and businesses

**183**

people still reported missing in Sonoma County

**17**

active wildfires statewide, which have burned 115,000 acres

More Wine Country fire coverage, Pages A8-A17. Updates online at [sfchronicle.com/north-bay-fires](http://sfchronicle.com/north-bay-fires)

**Trial opens in slaying of 5**

► S.F. prosecutors argue that Binh Thai Luc slaughtered five members of the Lei family, then tried to cover his tracks. D1

**Lesson for Hollywood?**

► Chronicle movie critic Mick LaSalle thinks there’s a chance the Harvey Weinstein scandal could change the industry’s culture. E1

**Weather**

Sunny.

Highs: 63-77.

Lows: 34-52.

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