

Mountain Fire losses mount; recovery begins

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“In the end, it’s just a house,” Jim Blois, CEO of Blois Construction in Oxnard, said.

Blois’s home in Camarillo Heights was one of, at last count, nearly 220 structures destroyed in the Mountain Fire which erupted Nov. 6 in the unincorporated Somis area northeast of Camarillo.

Fueled by fierce Santa Ana winds, the fire jumped Highway 118 into the Camarillo Heights area, leveling homes. Another 154 structures have been damaged in the partially contained blaze which consumed 20,630 acres, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

As of November 13, home losses were likely headed into the hundreds of millions as Ventura County officials were scrambling to secure federal emergency funding and farmers were assessing

crop losses. As the fire investigation continued, Southern California Edison was facing the first of what could be a number of lawsuits related to the blaze.

Putting things into perspective, Blois told the Business Times Nov. 11 that he's just thankful that he, his wife and his daughter evacuated without harm.

"Another positive side is we'll be able to rebuild" the renovated 1956 farmhouse loosely worth an estimated \$1.3 million, he said.

Blois, whose construction company is one of the largest in the region, calculated the rebuild will cost in the neighborhood of \$600,000 to \$800,000.

"It's not a great thing to go through, but it's not the end of the world," he said.

Greg Anderson, executive vice president of insurance broker Assured Partners, said that while he wasn't aware of any damage estimates, homes in the Camarillo Heights and Spanish Hills areas are multimillion-dollar residences.

"So, it doesn't take a lot to have a huge number," Anderson said.

A Business Times estimate of \$1 million per home destroyed would put the total over \$200 million, plus any additional value for homes damaged.

Ventura County crops were hit hard by the fire.

Korrine Bell, Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner, said an estimated 12,000 acres were impacted.

A partial survey of the acres as of Nov. 11 puts a preliminary damage estimate at \$6.3 million, primarily to avocados, which tend to burn more than other crops, she said.

Other damaged crops include citrus, raspberries, wine grapes and nursery stock, Bell said adding that rangeland was also impacted, she said adding that the losses will rise as more data comes in.

“It’s difficult to quantify the value of grazing,” Bell said. “But now that we’ve had a couple of years of rain, it’s a little bit more valuable than it has been.”

Patrick Maynard, director of the Ventura County Sheriff’s Office of Emergency Services, addressed fire emergency funding at a county Board of Supervisors special meeting Nov. 12.

He said county officials are trying to get Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) public assistance funding and individual funding, but damage thresholds haven’t yet been met.

Maynard said FEMA requires damages of more than \$70 million to qualify for public assistance.

The agency requires a major disaster declaration by President Biden and upwards of 1000 destroyed structures for individual assistance. The county is well below the threshold for the individual assistance, he said.

“Right now, we are in the process of collecting information on damage structures and damage to infrastructure,” he said.

“This information will be shared with the state and FEMA for consideration,” he said.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has declared a state of emergency and a federal Fire Management Assistance Grant has been made available to the jurisdiction, Maynard said.

U.S. Small Business Administration loans for residents and businesses will be activated, he said.

A California Disaster Assistance Act Fund will likely be a source of funding too, Maynard said.

The county has asked for the activation of USDA loans for agricultural operators, he said.

Meanwhile, the board of directors of the nonprofit Ventura County Community Foundation on Nov. 9 authorized the distribution of \$20,000 in direct financial assistance to support eight families who lost their housing in the fire.

Another \$10,000 was allocated to cover costs for emergency animal evacuations and ongoing care.

The latter funds were contributions from local donors to support animal welfare.

In the private sector, Wells Fargo bank has committed \$100,000 to fire recovery, said Vanessa Bechtel, president and CEO of the foundation.

Since there is currently no FEMA assistance, “philanthropy is really the only support at this time for these households that have been impacted,” she said.

Bruce Stenslie, president and CEO of the Camarillo-based Economic Development Collaborative, said it’s too early to get a grip on the overall economic impact of the fire.

“There’s a whole lot of assessment that’s going on as businesses, families, homeowners are being asked to report the damage they’ve got,” he said.

Stenslie said that with a disaster such as a fire, there are two kinds of very distinct and separate impacts.

“First and foremost, and most miserably are, of course, the direct impacts to homeowners, the loss of property,” he said.

On the business side, there are some indirect impacts, he said.

“There’s a whole lot of disruption, a lot of lost sales, businesses closed,” Stenslie said.

He said the collaborative, a business consulting nonprofit for the greater Ventura and Santa Barbara counties region, is there to help.

“We make sure that we’re reaching out to businesses, identifying what kind of impacts they had, and making sure that we provide support to them,” Stenslie said.

As of Nov. 12, the fire was 48% contained, according to Cal Fire. Five civilians and one firefighter have been injured.

As the investigation into the fire’s origins continues, a class action lawsuit was filed Nov. 8 in Ventura County Superior Court alleging that the fire was started by Southern California Edison’s equipment.

The suit, alleging negligence, was filed by Pamela and Kenneth McWaid and seeks general damages. Edison could not be immediately reached for comment.

Edison in 2017 agreed to pay \$80 million to settle claims that its utility equipment sparked the massive Thomas Fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

Edison in 2019 agreed to pay \$210 million to settle claims that its equipment sparked the huge Woosley Fire in Los Angeles and Ventura counties in 2018.

Since then it has instituted shut-off procedures during high wind events and strengthened much of its infrastructure.

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