

California's Paradise: a ghost town emerging from hell

November 11 2018, by Laurent Banguet



Abandoned vehicles sit on the side of a road, destroyed by flames, in Paradise, north of Sacramento, California

Smoldering debris, skeletons of cars with melted glass, a cat with a singed, soot-covered coat: ravaged by the most destructive fire to hit California, Paradise is now a ghost town.

"It's devastation, total devastation, it's pretty incredible something like this occurred," said firefighter Mark Nees, who arrived from neighboring Oregon to help his California colleagues.

"We've gone through lots of wildfire over the years, this is the worst I've seen personally," the team leader told AFP.

In the center of town as well as the suburbs, there is nothing left of many houses—most of which are built of wood in California—except charred debris and sometimes a brick chimney rising into the sky.

Some buildings are strangely spared, such as an almost intact garage surrounded by a white plastic fence that was melted from the heat.

Firefighters' red trucks and yellow suits, along with the blue pickups of electricity company workers, are the only splashes of color in the desolate, ashen grey landscape: the 27,000 inhabitants of Paradise were evacuated, some barely escaping the flames.

Others were not so lucky: rescue workers recovered bodies from burned residences in Paradise on Saturday as the death toll from the blaze mounts.



Yuba County Sheriff officers carry a body away from a burned residence in Paradise, California

Inhabitants were prevented from returning to the area as a state of emergency requires, a police officer told AFP.

Despite the protests of residents who want to try to find a loved one, an animal or just to find out if their house is still standing, dozens of vehicles were forced to turn back.

'I don't know where else to look'

Other evacuees wait in anguish near the police barricade, including Katie

McCrary, an old lady without a cell phone who has no news of her two sons and grandchildren.

"I don't know if they are all right, if they got out, I've been to the shelters in Chico, they're not there," she said, referring to a neighboring city.



Firefighters discover a Purple Heart and other medals of valor at a burned property in Paradise

"I don't know where else to look," McCrary said, with soot on her sweater, visibly exhausted after having spent two nights in her car on the side of the road.

Dozens of people were still missing on Saturday.

"Our neighbor and his daughter stayed, we haven't been able to get hold of them and they live right below us," said Jodie Colvard, who was not present when the evacuation took place.

She also waits, and worries about her dog.

"Our German shepherd is still in there, we left in the morning and we couldn't get back in, so she's still in there," Colvard said.



Dogs roam burned out neighborhoods as the Camp fire tears through Paradise

An electricity company employee took the address and promised to check on the dog.

"If the house is still there," she said.

The fire, which has already consumed over 150 square miles (390 square kilometers) of forest and brush, continued to rage on Saturday, and was only 20 percent contained.

What is left of Paradise is still not safe: "It is still very early, there is a wind event predicted tonight till Monday morning, red flag for fire again," said Nees, the firefighter.

There are "potential areas that have not burned that can possibly have new fire if embers are thrown," he said.



An abandoned burned-out school bus sits on the side of a road in Paradise

He and his men are working "so that things don't get any worse."

"Hopefully people will be able to come back," Nees said.

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