

California wildfire victims say cleanup crews add to woes

October 8 2018, by Paul Elias



In this Nov. 8, 2017, file photo, work crews remove debris at the site of a home destroyed by fires in the Coffey Park area of Santa Rosa, Calif. California Office of Emergency Services Director Mark Ghilarducci complained to the Army that contractors it paid by the ton to clear debris took too much dirt and damaged or removed perfectly fine driveways, retaining walls and the like after the 2017 wine country fire that destroyed thousands of homes. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

One year after a devastating series of wildfires ripped through Northern California wine country, destroying thousands of homes, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' first experience cleaning up after a wildfire has turned into an expensive bureaucratic mess and California's top emergency official suspects fraud played a role.

In October 2017, state and local officials lacked the resources to quickly clear still-smoldering and toxic debris from 4,500 homes destroyed by a wildfire in and near Santa Rosa. So the Army was called in.

The Army was in charge of awarding \$1.3 billion in cleanup contracts to three contractors, which hired dozens of smaller companies to haul away the debris and dispose of it in landfills. The hauling companies were paid by the ton. The more they hauled, the more they earned.

The first complaints started almost as soon as the first dump truck was loaded in November. Homeowners said workers were digging too deep and taking too much dirt from their lots. They also said perfectly fine driveways, retaining walls, sidewalks and the like were damaged or removed.

By the summer, nearly 1,000 homeowners had flooded the Army, state and local officials with complaints. After its contractors hauled away 2 million tons (1.8 million metric tons) of debris, the U.S. Army Corps declared mission accomplished and left without responding to homeowners' complaints, Sonoma County Supervisor Shirlee Zane said.



In this Nov. 8, 2017, file photo, work crews remove debris at the site of a home destroyed by fires in the Coffey Park area of Santa Rosa, Calif. Hundreds of California wine country homeowners who lost their houses to the state's most destructive wildfire last year are complaining that a \$1.3 billion U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cleanup project made their situations worse. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

"These folks were traumatized by the fire and then traumatized again by the cleanup," said Zane, who represents Santa Rosa's hardest-hit neighborhoods. "Someone needed to help us."

In August, Zane and a contingent of Sonoma County officials trekked to the state capital in Sacramento and persuaded the California Office of Emergency Services to fix what the Army wouldn't.

Director Mark Ghilarducci said the Office of Emergency Services has spent millions repairing the damage, and more work remains. In a letter

sent last month, Ghilarducci demanded that the Army reimburse the state and return to California to fix the lots still in need of repair.

Ghilarducci said it's "probable" that unscrupulous contractors committed fraud, citing "egregious oversight" by federal officials.

"Given these subcontractors were paid per ton of soil removed, it is probable this over-excavation was an intentional effort to capitalize on this tragedy by defrauding the government," Ghilarducci wrote to the U.S. Army Corps last month.



In this Nov. 8, 2017, file photo, Rick Brown, of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, watches work crews remove debris at the site of a home destroyed by fires in the Coffey Park area of Santa Rosa, Calif. California Office of Emergency Services Director Mark Ghilarducci complained to the Army that contractors it paid by the ton to clear debris took too much dirt and damaged or removed perfectly fine driveways, retaining walls and the like after the 2017

wine country fire that destroyed thousands of homes. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

Corps spokesman Mike Petersen said no evidence of fraud has been reported. He said the Federal Emergency Management Agency was preparing a response to Ghilarducci's letter.

Ghilarducci also argued the U.S. Army Corps failed to properly monitor the cleanup and its subcontractors' performance.

"Due to this egregious oversight," Ghilarducci wrote, "contractors caused substantial damage to many survivors' properties resulting in revictimization of the affected wildfire survivors."

Several of them were cited by the Contractors State License Board for operating without a license.

In addition, the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration fined Chico-based Randy Hill Construction \$11,700 after one of its workers was fatally struck by a truck while dumping debris. The agency found the truck's safety system was improperly disconnected and was the reason it accidentally started and ran over 60-year-old Ezekiel Sumner in December.



In this Nov. 8, 2017, file photo, former resident Larry Keyser looks around as he and volunteers from Samaritan's Purse disaster relief sift through remains of his family's home destroyed by fires in the Coffey Park area of Santa Rosa, Calif. Hundreds of California wine country homeowners who lost their houses to the state's most destructive wildfire in 2017 are complaining that a \$1.3 billion U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cleanup project made their situations worse. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

Hill Construction did not return phone calls.

Petersen said conditions varied widely at the 4,563 properties U.S. Army contractors cleared in four counties, and some sites required extensive digging to remove contaminated soil.

He said the Corps was satisfied with the work of the three main contractors, and "the great majority of subcontractors on the program

operated with high professional standards." The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is a major Army command, composed of about 37,000 civilian and military personnel.

Petersen said it was one of the biggest cleanup jobs after a natural disaster for the Corps, which is routinely called in after hurricanes and earthquakes but lacks experience with wildfires.

"This caused issues in the debris removal process," the U.S. Government Accountability Office concluded in a report released last month.



This Oct. 14, 2017, file photo shows the devastation of the Coffey Park neighborhood after a wildfire swept through in Santa Rosa, Calif. California Office of Emergency Services Director Mark Ghilarducci complained to the Army that contractors it paid by the ton to clear debris took too much dirt and damaged or removed perfectly fine driveways, retaining walls and the like after the 2017 wine country fire that destroyed thousands of homes. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

The GAO report made no recommendations but noted the cleanup effort was California's biggest since the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

Most complaints about the cleanup come from Santa Rosa residents and other Sonoma County residents where the wildfire struck an urban center. But at least 100 homeowners in rural Mendocino County have lodge complaints of "over excavation."

Karen Erickson said the U.S. contractors added at least \$200,000 to the cost of rebuilding her destroyed Santa Rosa home. She said contractors needlessly removed an undamaged driveway and dug so deep on her lot that they damaged her water pipes.

Because the contractors showed up after an insurance adjuster inspected her property, Erickson said the damage done to her property by the cleanup wasn't factored into her insurance reimbursement.

"Paying those guys by the ton was stupid," she said. "Who wouldn't load their trucks with as much as they could?"

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