

The hunt for missing, dead in California fire

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In this Tuesday, Nov. 13, 2018 file photo, search and rescue workers search for human remains at a trailer park burned out from the Camp fire in Paradise, Calif. Officials say the search to find the missing and identify victims could take months given the size and scope of the deadly wildfire that swept Northern California's Gold Rush country. The Camp Fire in Butte County that started two weeks ago has killed multiple people and hundreds of names are on a fluctuating list of the unaccounted. (AP Photo/John Locher, File)

Given the size and scope of the devastation after a deadly wildfire swept Northern California, experts say the search to find the missing and

identify victims could take months.

The Camp Fire that began two weeks ago has scorched an area roughly the size of Chicago, burned down more than 13,000 homes and killed at least 81 people, with the number increasing daily. Hundreds of people are unaccounted for—a list that's constantly changing and has spread confusion about the ultimate number of victims.

Here are answers about the search for the dead and missing after the deadliest U.S. wildfire in at least a century destroyed the town of Paradise, population 27,000, and surrounding communities:

WHY DOES THE NUMBER OF 'MISSING' KEEP FLUCTUATING?

Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea has released a daily list of names of people who are unaccounted for, saying he doesn't expect it to be an accurate tally of the missing. He calls it a liberal roster of "raw data" intended to prompt people—some who may not know they have been reported missing—to call in and say they're safe.

The list has jumped from about 600 to 1,000 names before hitting a high of nearly 1,300 this past weekend. It stands at 870 names Wednesday as deputies find people and people call in to say they were OK. Names are continually being removed and added.

The Associated Press reviewed the newest list and has found names of people reported as alive by family on social media. There are at least a dozen names marked as "unknown," including a "cousin" and several with no last names. The list contains several entries that may be duplicates with different spellings.

HOW IS THE LIST COMPILED?

Names are compiled from emails, [phone calls](#) and emergency dispatch reports, Honea said. The number of names ramped up in part because deputies went back to calls from the early hours of the disaster, when people were calling frantically for help finding friends and family.

It is not clear at what point sheriff's officials remove a name because a person is presumed dead. Evacuee Christina Taft said her mother's name is no longer on the roster, but she has not received official confirmation that Victoria Taft is dead.



In this Thursday, Nov. 15, 2018, file photo, residences leveled by the wildfire line a neighborhood in Paradise, Calif. Officials say the search to find the missing and identify victims could take months given the size and scope of the deadly wildfire that swept Northern California's Gold Rush country. The Camp Fire in Butte County that started two weeks ago has killed dozens of people with the number increasing daily. (AP Photo/Noah Berger, File)

Honea said the number of names rose Tuesday night after workers went through a backlog of voicemails.

IS IT POSSIBLE THAT HUNDREDS ARE DEAD?

Honea has declined to speculate on the eventual scope of deaths, preferring to instead release nightly updates on the death toll based on remains that have been recovered.

WHO IS IN CHARGE OF SEARCH AND RECOVERY?

The Butte County sheriff's office is leading the effort, with assistance from search and recovery teams, cadaver detection and coroners' units from other counties, California, other states and the U.S. government.

"It's his county, and he and his team are leading the operations," Kelly Huston, a spokesman with the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services, said of Honea.

Volunteers also are helping track the names of people reported as safe.

IS IT NORMAL TO HAVE SO MUCH CONFUSION TWO WEEKS AFTER A DISASTER?

Yes, according to emergency services experts.

Sonoma County sheriff's Sgt. Spencer Crum says his office took some 2,200 reports of missing people during last year's devastating wildfires in Northern California wine country. Eventually, 24 were confirmed dead. Most were identified within the first month, but Crum said it took two months to clear all the [names](#).



In this Tuesday, Nov. 13, 2018 file photo, messages are shown on a bulletin board at The Neighborhood Church in Chico, Calif. Numerous postings fill the message board as evacuees, family and friends search for people missing from the northern California wildfire. Officials say the search to find the missing and identify victims could take months given the size and scope of the deadly wildfire that swept Northern California's Gold Rush country. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus, File)

The numbers were high in part because people, including distant relatives and long-ago friends, called in with incomplete information, Crum said.

His office prioritized callers who had specific information, such as a daughter calling in for help finding an elderly mother at her home address who likely could not have escaped a wildfire alone.

Crum expects the current search for victims will take months given the number of destroyed homes, far exceeding the 4,600 houses that burned down in Sonoma County last year.

"They're just getting started," he said.

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO IDENTIFY THE DEAD?

Sheriff Honea has said it's possible officials will never know the exact death toll.

Light rain began falling Wednesday, which could potentially disturb remains. Searchers are looking carefully for fragments of bone, with some imagining where a person may have been when the fire roared through.

"In some cases, all they have is bone fragments and pieces of dental work and teeth, so it's immensely more challenging to identify people who have perished in a fire of this magnitude," said Kelly, the emergency services spokesman.

HOW WILL RAIN AFFECT THE SEARCH FOR AND IDENTIFICATION OF REMAINS?

Rain is not helpful, but it's not a showstopper either, said Mitchell M. Holland, a biochemistry and molecular biology professor at Pennsylvania State University.

Water could shift ground and prompt mudslides that cover up remains, making them that much harder to find, he said. Also, "being exposed to water is never a great thing for DNA," but a good forensics lab can still extract information, Holland said.

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