

Debris and ash cleared, rebuilding starts for homes destroyed in Woolsey Fire

VC Star

Work to remove ash and debris from last year's destructive Hill and Woolsey fires has wrapped up, clearing the way for many homeowners to start to rebuild, officials said Wednesday.

Calling it a monumental milestone, state and local officials were in Agoura Hills to talk about the multi-agency effort to clean up the properties. Work started in January after three fires destroyed thousands of homes and killed dozens in California a few months earlier.

"We're closing in on 100% completion after moving more than 838 million pounds of wildfire ash, debris, metal, concrete and contaminated soil from nearly 1,000 properties throughout Los Angeles and Ventura counties," said Eric Lamoureux, deputy director of response and recovery operations of the governor's Office of Emergency Services.

Three people died and more than 1,600 homes and other buildings were destroyed in the November 2018 blazes in Ventura and Los Angeles counties.

In Northern California, the Camp Fire in Butte County ignited the same day and 85 people died and more than 14,000 homes and other buildings were destroyed.

So far, about 4.1 billion pounds of debris had been removed from properties burned in the Camp Fire, he said. The clean up there has passed the half-way point.

"We throw out these big numbers, but it's important to remember that these numbers represent many families who just want to go back home," said Mark de Bie, deputy director of the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, or CalRecycle.

He also took a moment to remember Dave Wilson, a water truck operator who died while working on debris removal along Deer Creek Road in Ventura County.

In May, authorities said the truck rolled off the road and flipped several times after Wilson pulled over to let a vehicle pass along the steep, narrow road.

Back-to-back wildfires

A first phase of the cleanup program focused on removing any toxic debris. Then, crews managed by

CalRecycle removed remaining debris if the property owners had signed up to participate. There is no cost to property owners outside of the reimbursement available for debris removal through the homeowners' insurance policies. Roughly 80% of property owners participated, officials said. While ash and debris removal has been completed in Ventura and Los Angeles counties, some soil tests and erosion control work is still happening.

In Ventura County, 100 properties signed up for the state program and close to 80% have had a final inspection, which is needed to start reconstruction. The county has issued its first permit to rebuild for a home in the Yerba Buena area, Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks said Wednesday.

It was the second time in less than a year that local homeowners had gone through a major wildfire and clean up effort. The first was in December 2017 when the Thomas Fire burned more than 1,000 homes in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

"I'm still seeing debris trucks going down the road," Parks said. "It isn't over for the Woolsey Fire victims."

But locals know there may be more fires and emphasis also has to be on prevention, she said. "So we don't have to be here again in less than a year."

Estimated \$98 million in damages

Calling the Woolsey Fire unprecedented in Los Angeles County, Public Works Director Mark Pestrella said cost of the damage was estimated at \$98 million.

"It's impossible to measure the fire's long- and short-term impacts to families that have been displaced from their homes," Pestrella said. "But I can tell you that we take those calls everyday and one of the major milestones they have been worried about is when they can get back to their homes or rebuilding their homes."

Wednesday's news conference was held at Reagan Ranch, part of Malibu Creek State Park. Former President Ronald Reagan once owned the property. A barn and stables from the ranch still remained before the fire. Those structures and trailers the park used for staff housing and operations were destroyed in the blaze.

CalRecycle cleaned up the Reagan Ranch property about a month or so ago, said California State Park district Superintendent Craig Sap on Wednesday.

About 75% of the Malibu Creek park and nearly all of nearby Leo Carrillo State Park burned in the Woolsey Fire.

In total, about half of the park district's buildings were destroyed in the fire, he said. "We have a lot of rebuilding to do."