

## **Insurance commissioner asks insurers to extend benefits for 2017 fire survivors**

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State insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara is seeking help from the industry he regulates for survivors of the Wine Country wildfires who are still struggling to rebuild their homes.

After meeting in Santa Rosa on Tuesday night with city officials and block captains from neighborhoods ravaged by the Tubbs Fire, Lara announced he had requested that insurers continue paying living expenses for policyholders without inhabitable homes for an additional year. He also asked insurers to cover the full replacement cost for new homes instead of subtracting the land value.

The notices, sent to residential insurance companies on Tuesday, would aid thousands of 2017 wildfire survivors who are still trying to rebuild their homes and are struggling with shortages of contractors and building supplies and delays in demolishing burned homes and hauling away debris.

Following the 2017 fires in the North Bay, state lawmakers in 2018 extended living expense coverage from 24 to 36 months, but the new laws do not apply retroactively to survivors of the 2017 fires that destroyed 5,300 homes and caused more than \$12 billion in losses across five counties.

Now many of those survivors face the loss of insurance benefits within months. Homeowner policies typically cover additional living expenses such as food and housing costs, furniture rental, moving and storage and transportation expenses while a home is uninhabitable.

“With labor shortages and other outside factors delaying the rebuilding process, time is running out for many who lost their homes in the 2017 fires,” Lara said in a statement. “I urge insurers to show good faith with their policyholders by extending living expense payments to those who have endured so many delays beyond their control.”

Lara also issued a second request asking insurers not to subtract the value of the land beneath destroyed homes when calculating their replacement costs, should fire survivors choose to buy a replacement home instead of rebuilding.

“We’ve been pushing hard to ensure policyholders get the full value when they replace their home by buying,” said Amy Bach, executive director of United Policyholders, a nonprofit advocacy group that

represents insurance purchasers.

Nicole Mahrt-Ganley, a spokeswoman for the American Property Casualty Insurance Association, which represents about 60% of home insurance companies, did not comment on the specifics of Lara's proposal but said insurers understand the fires were a large-scale disaster and that there have been delays caused by material and labor shortages.

"The law allows for flexibility," she said. "While insurers cannot increase the amount of coverage under a policy, they can, as the commissioner requested, work with policyholders to provide more time for rebuilding. Policyholders should always have a conversation with their insurer to find solutions."