

[Insurance companies ease inventory requirements for Sonoma County fire victims](#)

The Press Democrat

Kitty Loberg said she could only devote minimal blocks of time to remember all the personal items she lost when the October wildfires destroyed her Redwood Valley home.

“When your body is still in a shocked state in trying to deal with the reality of rebuilding) and everything with that ... It hurts,” said Loberg. “Your mind starts screaming at you and says, ‘No, I just don’t want to do this.’”

Here and there, Loberg would compile a list of items lost inside her house, barn and shed on her 1-acre property in Mendocino County.

And then she caught a break. Her insurer, CSAA Insurance Group, stopped asking for a detailed list in January. Instead, it allowed Loberg to submit a summary of her property losses from 65 different categories to simplify and speed up the claims process.

CSAA is one of almost 50 insurers pressured by state Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones in December to pay North Bay fire victims up to 100 percent of their personal property coverage limits without a detailed inventory.

Jones required insurers to show state regulators how they intended to help fire victims get bigger insurance payouts with less paperwork and stress. He publicly listed the names of insurers that paid out more — and less — than 50 percent of their coverage limits without documentation, enabling fire victims to gauge how their company was treating customers in the wake of the disaster.

Loberg credits such pressure for helping her ultimately get every penny out of her policy covering personal property without listing every single item she lost, though she still had to submit estimates of her losses broken down into broad categories.

“I think it was a good thing he did,” she said of Jones. “It provided some support to help on everything else.”

Jones’ action — along with policyholders banding together to pressure top industry executives — has had a significant results, said Amy Bach, executive director of the United Policyholders, a San Francisco-based

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consumer advocacy group. Her group has assisted fire victims with advice on how to lobby and negotiate with their insurance carrier.

“I think the momentum has been building on this issue since the last major catastrophe,” Bach said. “On this one issue), I think this is really strong.”

Twenty-two percent of fire victims said they received 100 percent of their personal property claims without being required by their carrier to submit a complete home inventory, according a survey conducted by United Policyholders.

Under pressure from policyholders and Jones, 39 carriers have publicly pledged to pay at least 50 percent of a fire victims’ personal property claim without an itemized list. Many have agreed to pay even more, but Jones said he could not release specific payout policies because their reports to regulators were not covered under the California Public Records Act.

State Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg, wants insurers to pay out at least 80 percent of personal property claims without itemization in the aftermath of a declared state of emergency. McGuire’s bill, SB 897, would be applied retroactively to July 1. “This is going to be one hell of a fight,” McGuire said of advancing his bill against the insurance lobby.

The Press Democrat surveyed the 10 largest insurance companies in the North Bay and their policyholders to determine how much money they were receiving for personal property claims without itemizing their losses. The 10 insurers cover 89 percent of the homes insured in Sonoma County, according to the state Department of Insurance.

Only one carrier, Farmers Insurance Group, confirmed directly that it is paying out 100 percent to its customers without itemization. “This one-time decision was arrived at after taking account of the unique conditions surrounding the California wildfires and their aftermath,” said Farmers spokesman Luis Shagun in a statement.

Liberty Mutual/SAFECO would not disclose an overall percentage on reimbursement; however, in many cases it paid out 100 percent without an inventory based on in-depth conversations between fire victims and its claims adjusters, said spokesman Glenn Greenberg.

Likewise, Chubb did not provide an exact percentage, but said its requirements for an inventory of personal property losses were flexible. The company requires customers to verbally provide an overview of the personal property lost in the fire. An adjuster later conducts an on-site inspection, said spokesman Eric Samansky.

“These two methods are used to confirm the existence of a fully furnished home. Where we establish the home was fully furnished, Chubb releases the full written policy limit on the personal property coverage to the client,” Samansky said in an email.

One Allstate policyholder told The Press Democrat that he received a 100 percent payout two weeks after Jones’ request. The company did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Four insurers were paying at least 75 percent of a fire victims’ personal property claim without an itemized list. State Farm, The Hartford and USAA all confirmed they were paying claims at that percentage. USAA has been paying that level for catastrophes since 2011, said spokesman Roger Wildermuth. Nationwide policyholders told The Press Democrat they received a 75 percent payout, though the company did not provide any specific percentages when contacted.

Many of those customers have lobbied their carriers to pay 100 percent of their personal property claims without itemization.

State Farm spokesman Sevag Sarkissian noted that consumers who want more coverage for personal property can always buy it from their insurer. The company bases its prices on how much it anticipates actually paying in personal property claims, not on how much it would cost the company to automatically pay out 100 percent of the value of its customers’ policies.

“If rates were to be based on policy limits instead of actual losses they would be significantly higher for all of our customers,” Sarkissian said in an email.

CSAA clarified its documentation requirements in January when customers began trading stories about the way they had been treated. Some received 100 percent payouts for personal property losses without having to file any itemization, while others were told to inventory their specific losses.

As part of its subsequent outreach, CSAA gave out the cellphone numbers of its top claims officials to more than 650 customers so they could contact them directly if they had any concerns about their claims, said spokeswoman Sue Saito. Loberg said she called one official when she had some problems over payment of debris cleanup, which he resolved to her satisfaction.

The Travelers did not detail the company’s policy on personal property payouts.

Some Travelers policyholders said they were especially disappointed when they discovered the company would only pay out 50 percent without itemization — the lowest rate of the top 10.

Janet Hendrickson wrote to Travelers CEO Alan Schnitzer in January to plead her case after her home was destroyed in Tubbs fire.

“Putting together these lists and then having each item depreciated is not only time consuming but even worse, agonizing leading to feelings of great despair,” she wrote.

Hendrickson said she was told by a Travelers official that the company offered bigger payouts for personal property losses than its competitors, even though some of its rivals were paying out claims at a higher threshold without requiring documentation. She eventually turned in an inventory list. “My response was Travelers determined the amount for inventory not me. I paid for that amount and as such that is what I should receive,” Hendrickson said in an email. You can reach Staff Writer Bill Swindell at 707-521-5223 or bill.swindell@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @BillSwindell.