Kincade fire survivors gather for updates, resources at Alexander Valley Community Center

The Press Democrat

When the more than 200 Kincade fire survivors who gathered Saturday morning at the Alexander Valley Community Center in Geyserville heard a firefighter introduce himself, they filled the hall with applause. More than half of them had structures burned in the fire. Some lost entire crops to the 77,758-acre fire, Sonoma County's largest. Others lost everything.

Their pain, at least for the moment, was put on hold.

Cal Fire union representative Doug Jones, who was offering $250 gift cards to get folks back on their feet, then passed the microphone to the next person.

Sonoma County Supervisor James Gore's office, as well as the county and its various departments, organized the Alexander Valley meeting, seeking to provide residents with information and resources on anything fire survivors might need to begin their recovery process. Fire can touch almost every aspect of a person's life, from lost wages to lost houses, and recovery requires residents to consider debris removal, permitting, soil testing, water runoff, taxes, insurance and more.

"Who all is overwhelmed right now?" Gore said, asking for a show of hands.

About half of those in attendance signaled, many with a laugh. A little more than three weeks ago, the whole area was under a mandatory evacuation order while the fire raged.

Ellen Johnson lost one structure to the Kincade fire, but her property near Alexander Valley Elementary School also was home to Johnson's Alexander Valley Wines, and Johnson said she lost entire crops.

"It went through the vineyards and pretty much took our income for the year," she said. "I still have to figure out how I'm going to pay my mortgage."

There was a booth for that.

Sonoma County Farm Bureau joined the USDA, Sonoma Resource Conservation District, Sonoma County Department of Health Services, United Policyholders, Sonoma County Clerk-Recorder's Office and Permit

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Sonoma with an informational booth.

Still other helpers or potential contractors showed up with paperwork and business cards.

"There's no perfect way forward," Gore said at the start of the meeting, before passing the microphone around the room. "The goal today is to make sure questions are answered or followed up with."

Fire survivors received updates on tree cutting, hazardous waste removal, the debris removal process and more.

The Kincade fire impacted 231 parcels and 434 structures, according to officials. Those impacted, as of Friday, are now on the clock to clean up the mess.

They have until Jan. 31 to file a debris removal application with the county. They have until May 15 to get that debris removal complete.

Vanessa Vann, who lost her home on Chalk Hill Road, said she was most interested in learning more about debris removal. But after finding her grandma's ceramic mug intact, she said she's not done looking through what she lost quite yet.

So she plans to talk with a man who brought up the idea of sifting, and is interested in the experience those who survived the deadly 2017 North Bay wildfires have with the method.

"I was happy finding one thing," Vann said. "I felt if I could go to the house and get one thing, I would be happy."

She said there are other smaller things she'd like to look for, too.

After each portion of the meeting, officials answered questions. They took notes on questions they couldn't answer. They even answered some questions in real time: The white stakes at some houses signified those homes had been cleared of hazardous waste, a $500,000-$750,000 county-funded program regarded as the first step toward recovery.

Officials didn't know the meaning of the stakes when the question was first asked. Gore said it was a good example of a sort of messy, imperfect process, but an important one all the same.

"This was desperately needed," Gore said, saying more people came than he expected. "It's difficult, but it's necessary. It's just a reminder that there's no perfect; it's imperfect, relentless progress."