

Order protects Mother Lode homeowners from insurance cancellations, non-renewals

The Union Democrat

California's insurance commissioner issued an order Wednesday that prevents companies from dropping nearly 210,000 homeowners in areas affected by wildfires this year, including most of Tuolumne County and southern Calaveras County due to the Washington Fire near downtown Sonora on Aug. 26.

State Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara said in a news release this week that the moratorium prevents companies from cancelling or non-renewing residential property insurance policyholders for one year, from Oct. 22 this year to the same date next year.

"This one year of protection gives these communities added incentive to protect their homes from future wildfire disasters," he said. "My department and I will be there from day one of recovery until the job is done and communities are safer."

The ban covers 115 ZIP codes within the perimeters or adjoining those within the perimeters of the Washington, River Complex, French, Windy, KNP Complex, and Hopkins wildfires, all of which received an emergency declaration from Gov. Gavin Newsom on Oct. 22.

In Tuolumne County, the covered ZIP codes for the Washington Fire are 95305 (Big Oak Flat), 95309 (Chinese Camp), 95310 (Columbia), 95321 (Groveland), 95327 (Jamestown), 95329 (La Grange), 95346 (Mi-Wuk Village), 95347 (Moccasin), 95370 (Sonora), 95372 (Soulsbyville), 95373 (Standard), 95379 (Tuolumne), and 95383 (Twain Harte).

Also protected as a result of the Washington Fire are the following ZIP codes in Calaveras County: 95221 (Altaville), 95222 (Angels Camp), 95228 (Copperopolis), 95229 (Douglas Flat), 95247 (Murphys), and 95251 (Vallecito), as well as 95361 (East Oakdale) in Stanislaus County.

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Other counties covered by Wednesday's order include parts of Del Norte, Fresno, Humboldt, Inyo, Kern, Lake, Mendocino, Shaster, Siskiyou, Trinity, and Tulare.

The addition of the ZIP codes on Wednesday brings the total number of policyholders receiving temporary protection statewide this year to 618,700 across 31 counties, in an effort to ease a shortage of affordable homeowners insurance in fire-prone parts of the state.

Lara's ability to issue such moratoriums stems from a 2018 law he authored while serving as a state senator before he was elected to his current office later that year, which the release said is "part of a comprehensive solution he is pursuing that includes increasing insurance protections and market competition to help protect consumers."

"Commissioner Lara and his team are using every tool in their toolbox to help California homeowners keep their homes insured during these challenging times," said Amy Bach, executive director of United Policyholders, a nonprofit consumer advocacy group. "This latest non-renewal moratorium will be a financial lifeline to hundreds of thousands of households, and it sends the right signal to insurers to stay the course while we work to reduce wildfire risk and restore the home insurance marketplace."

The issue of homeowners insurance affordability and availability is nothing new for Mother Lode residents, especially those in Tuolumne County, who have grappled with the cancellations, non-renewals, and skyrocketing premiums since at least the 2013 Rim Fire.

Many homeowners in Tuolumne County have been forced to find insurance through the state's insurance safety net, the FAIR Plan, which is typically more costly and previously only covered damage from fires.

Lara, a Democrat, went on a listening tour of 36 counties in 2019 that included a stop at the Sonora Opera Hall attended by hundreds of Tuolumne County residents, many of whom shared similar stories about their struggles with homeowners insurance.

The visit followed years of advocacy at the state level by county supervisors and other local government officials that included a coordinated effort in 2015 to gather written testimonials from residents experiencing the issue. California's insurance commissioner issued an order Wednesday that prevents companies from dropping nearly 210,000 homeowners in areas affected by wildfires this year, including

most of Tuolumne County and southern Calaveras County due to the Washington Fire near downtown Sonora on Aug. 26.

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