

Who cleans up wildfire debris: Private contractors or the government?

KTVU

SANTA ROSA, Calif. Debora Villalon/KTVU – Progress is being made in North Bay fire recovery, as thousands of scorched properties have been cleared of household hazardous waste.

But the next, more complex step, is debris removal, a much thornier issue for homeowners.

“No one knows what to do, you just take it one day at a time,” fire survivor Hans Deppel told KTVU, as he sifted through the ash of his three-story home in Fountain Grove.

“I still wake up in the morning, thinking I’m in my bedroom, and then I see this,” he gestured toward the debris, “but we’re moving forward!”

In front of Deppel’s home, a small sign erected by the EPA, with a check mark and the words “Complete.” It’s evidence that the site has been inspected and hazards such as propane tanks and paint cans have been removed.

“It was a sign,” smiled Deppel, “a sign that said, we’re moving forward.”

EPA crews have been scouring parcels for almost a week.

With more than 6,000 to check, they’re about one-third finished.

“We’ve had about 2500 properties we’ve cleaned up in six days, so we’re making progress,” EPA

Onscene Coordinator Tom Dunkelman told KTVU, “and Wednesday alone, we did about 350 properties.”

But recovery is still in its infancy, and fire victims still have so many questions and concerns.

Wednesday evening, more than 500 people packed an informational meeting at the Santa Rosa Unitarian Universalist Church in Santa Rosa.

It was the second of two overflow sessions put on by “United Policyholders” a non- profit consumer advocacy group formed after the Oakland Hills firestorm in 1991.

“People are overwhelmed and this becomes their full-time job,” UP Executive Director Amy Bach told KTVU, “and what we found is there isn’t one right road for everybody. What works for one person may not be right for their neighbor.”

The big decision currently looming: whether homeowners will hire a private contractor to manage debris

clean up and site testing, or turn it over to the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, even though they require removal of the home's foundation.

"You can go in there and surgically clean-up these properties without destroying the foundations," argued Rick Goodman, a general contractor. "Then test the foundation and leave that up to the engineers and the geo-techs to see if it is still suitable for a new home."

But Bach says turning insurance proceeds for debris removal over to the government is a less risky option.

"This intense heat wastes foundations, so the chances of a foundation being salvageable are so very small. And it's free for the property owner," she advised.

Hans Dippel looks at the above-ground remnants of his foundation, scorched and cracked, and says he's going with the government clean-up.

"For us personally, we're opting in to have the Army Corp do it, because we think they'll do it quicker than anybody else, and they'll do a better job," he said, hopefully.

In the meantime, he's painstakingly sifting through the ash.

"There's a little bit of therapy involved in it," he observes, as he searches for something recognizable "We look at stuff that we find. Look at it, remember it, and tell the story, then toss it."

United Policyholders will have another free "Road to Recovery" workshop on Nov. 15 from 6 to 8 p.m. at 547 Mendocino Avenue in Santa Rosa.