VENTURA COUNTY
Recover

The Thomas Fire
Six-Month Review
June 2018
THE THOMAS FIRE

At 6:30 p.m. on Monday, December 4, 2017, fire broke out in two locations north of Santa Paula. They quickly merged to become the Thomas Fire, named due to the proximity of Thomas Aquinas College. The Thomas Fire would become the largest fire in California state history.

Driven to the west by fierce Santa Ana winds at an unprecedented rate, the Thomas Fire was an immediate threat to life and property. Advancing down the north side of the Santa Clara River Valley, the fire reached the city of Ventura during the late evening hours and the early morning hours of December 5, destroying hundreds of homes and other structures along its path.

The fire would burn for about 40 days, threatening the cities of Ventura, Santa Paula, Ojai and Fillmore, as well as many unincorporated communities, before moving into Santa Barbara County. One firefighter and one civilian lost their lives in the fire. It was declared 100 percent controlled on January 12, 2018.

At one point, nearly 9,000 emergency personnel were working the fire. They came from across the western United States. The recovery effort has been collaborative as well.

On December 5, the County’s Environmental Health Department requested an emergency declaration from the State. By requesting the declaration so early in the emergency, it allowed recovery processes such as the initial removal of hazardous fire debris to begin very rapidly. The Recovery Program was also implemented on the second day of the fire. By Day Four, a Joint Recovery Team had been formed to include the County and the four cities affected by the fire.

The County’s recovery website, www.venturacountyrecovers.org, gave residents a single source for verified information and resources to aid in the recovery process. It also allowed fire victims to register to receive announcements of official information on debris; aid- and assistance-related programs; community meetings; and important deadlines.

By the Numbers

- Acres: 281,893 (440 square miles)
- Ventura County structures destroyed: 1,063 (777 homes)
- Ventura County structures damaged: 280 (210 homes)
- Emergency Personnel (peak): >8,500
- Emergency Hotline Calls Answered: 14,000 (English & Spanish)
- Spanish-Language Emergency Information Website Established: December 15, 2017
- Number of People Evacuated: >94,000
- Residents Receiving “VC Alert” Emergency Notifications: 165,284
- Animals Cared For By Ventura County Animal Services: 2,300
REPOPULATION, DEBRIS REMOVAL AND RECOVERY

As the fire continued to move, repopulation and recovery efforts followed immediately behind it. The Joint Recovery Team, in cooperation with Fire Command, organized a series of community meetings across the areas affected by the fire to help residents understand when they could return to their homes safely and the challenges they would face when they arrived.

These included danger from power and gas lines, hazardous materials, ash and poor air quality. County staff also provided information on housing and rental assistance programs, and available medical and behavioral health services. As neighborhoods repopulated, residents became aware of the magnitude of their losses. Many had lost everything.

Understanding there was no guarantee that state or federal assistance would be available for victims, or how long it might be before it was available, eight days into the fire the County expanded its local housing and rental assistance program to provide direct aid to fire victims. The program was the first of its kind in the state and was the only source of government-provided monetary assistance for several weeks.

Just nine days after the fire started, the Joint Recovery Team opened a Local Assistance Center (LAC) in Ventura. The LAC was staffed by more than 40 agencies, departments and organizations. Local, state and federal government agencies were on hand to assist with counseling, housing, driver’s licenses, finances, food and many other services. Satellite LACs were opened within days in Ojai, Santa Paula and Fillmore.

A critical phase in the recovery process is debris removal. After a fire, much of the ash and debris is hazardous material, and all of it must be safely removed prior to rebuilding. Additional community meetings were held related to debris removal and a Mud and Debris Flow Symposium was held to warn and prepare residents for those possibilities because of the fire. That threat became a reality in Santa Barbara County when a debris flow swept through Montecito in January, killing more than 20 people.
The Department of Toxic Substances Control cleared 987 properties of hazardous materials. A program offered through the California Office of Emergency Services – CalRecycle – cleared debris from homeowner’s properties for no charge other than what their insurance might cover.

More than 600 homeowners signed up for the program and all the work was completed by June 1. CalRecycle left them with clean, safe properties ready for the rebuilding process to begin. To assist in that process, the County waived certain permit fees and implemented an expedited plan and permit review process for Thomas Fire victims.

A Presidential disaster declaration resulted in both public and individual federal assistance being made available for County residents affected by the fire. The Federal Emergency Management Agency and Small Business Administration both set up temporary offices in Ventura to aid victims.

Every County agency was involved in either the emergency response to the Thomas Fire or the recovery from it. A few examples are document replacement services by the County Clerk and Recorder; more than 2,000 fire-damaged properties surveyed by the Assessor’s Office and many fees were waived for fire victims by the Treasurer-Tax Collector’s Office. And finally, to address the threat of debris flows, the County ordered 65,000 sandbags and sent 20,000 mailings regarding debris and mudflows.

To find out more about the ongoing recovery efforts, please visit www.venturacountyrecovers.org