

Wildfires reshape lives on both sides of the valley

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Hank Pritchard goes into the travel trailer in Manton that has been his home since the Ponderosa Fire in 2012 destroyed his home.

Lorie McCallum remembers seeing the smoke rise above the pines from the front door of her two-story cabin in Manton like it was yesterday. The lightning-sparked Ponderosa Fire would grow to consume more than 27,000 acres — and McCallum’s home — in August 2012 before fire crews got it under control.

“It didn’t bother me as much losing the material possessions inside the home, it was the home itself,” McCallum said, who made it out with her two dogs shortly before flames scorched her plot along Forward Road. For months afterward she would bounce around, staying with friends, in hotel rooms and camping as she worked to get back on her feet.

Barely a year later, a pager would go off for Doug Atkins, the chief at the Igo-Ono Volunteer Fire

Co. — and that meant trouble.

“I called my wife and told her to go out the front of our house because it was in the direction the fire had started,” he said. “I asked her which way the wind was blowing, and she said right toward the house. It was time to go.”

Atkins drove through flames of the Clover Fire to reach his fire station in Igo where he suited up with other volunteers and headed into the blaze. As the crew worked to save homes along Cloverdale Road that day, Atkins’ home and that of his mother’s nearby would burn.

The Ponderosa and Clover fires ignited barely a year apart on opposite sides of the valley, but the impact they had on communities can still be felt — and seen — to this day. The fires brought many neighbors together in their respective necks of the woods and prompted a flood of donations from around the state and country. But as the initial shock wore off, those left to pick through the rubble turned to focus on the next steps ahead.

As with any disaster, the path to recovery has been marred with obstacles and setbacks. A pioneering spirit led many determined folks to rebuild among the ashes, while the scope of the work and labyrinth of new building regulations led others to cut their losses and make a go of it somewhere else.

More than 18 months after the Ponderosa Fire was quashed, tents and trailers still dot the roadsides next to newly reconstructed homes in the rural stretch of the North State. A similar scene persists on the west side of the valley, where the scars of the more than 8,000-acre Clover Fire are even fresher.

Fire in the pines

Henry “Hank” Pritchard’s family has lived in Paradise Valley for generations. His grandfather homesteaded in the east valley area back in 1872, and the home he built in the years that followed stood until the Ponderosa Fire tore through in late 2012.

“We lost everything but the pump house,” said Pritchard, 71, who lives on a 140-acre swath along Forwards Mill Road with his son, Craig. “It was pretty devastating.”

The fire would go on to burn 52 homes and more than 80 outbuildings over about two weeks.

Since then the father-and-son team managed to reconstruct a barn and a handful of outbuildings, but Hank Pritchard said he has hit one snag after another. For two winters now he has lived out of a fifth-wheel trailer on the property with his son residing just across the creek.

“I got a plan for my house and everything, I’m just waiting to settle with the insurance company so I can get the money to rebuild,” he said. “At this point they’re not even talking to me, so I went and hired an attorney and we’re in the process of filing (a lawsuit) on them.”

Another big hurdle has been dealing with the county, Pritchard said, who lives on the Shasta County side of the Manton community, divided by the Shasta and Tehama county lines.

“Shasta County has not been real helpful. They didn’t even want to give me a permit to put a pole up so I could have electricity,” he said. “But Tehama County, the guys on that side said that Tehama County was great.”

Shasta County Building Director Dale Fletcher said the county took the same steps to help residents after the Ponderosa Fire as it did a year later after the Clover Fire hit. Ponderosa served as a template, he said, and allowed the department to fine-tune some things that worked to help residents and others that didn’t.

“The biggest thing we offered was the opportunity for people to come in and set appointments with the plan reviewer or the planner to discuss their project,” Fletcher said. “There were only a handful of people that utilized that opportunity, but that in itself would have probably helped a lot.”

Following that blaze, Shasta County supervisors passed an ordinance allowing burned-out residents to rebuild their homes on land that may have been rezoned to a different use since the home was originally built. It sounds like a small change but it helped streamline the process for homeowners who chose to rebuild.

Yet a number still chose to cut their losses and move elsewhere.

“We worked with people quite a bit to make sure they could get their houses built, inspected and moved back in,” said John Stover, a building official with Tehama County. “But there have only been a few people that rebuilt.”

According to county records, only six of those displaced by the fire have applied to rebuild their homes. Tehama County has issued four permits and Shasta County two.

Bill Southwick, 49, was one of the people on the Tehama side of Manton who chose to stay. He replaced his double-wide modular home on his property, not far from the Pritchards’ ranch.

“There have only been about four of us so far that have rebuilt,” he said, noting that while Tehama County had worked with him to get back on the property, there were still a myriad of building and zoning codes to understand and comply with.

“What’s really different nowadays is the sprinkler systems you have to put in your house,” he said. “Mine was \$13,000, and I think that’s just way too expensive. It wouldn’t protect your house during a wildland fire anyways.”

Igo hills ablaze

Igo-Ono volunteer fire chief Doug Atkins doesn’t plan to rebuild.

“I’m just going to go buy a house somewhere else,” likely in the Happy Valley area nearby, he said. “It’s going to be a lot easier, I’ll be money ahead and I’m not going to have to deal with the county crap.”

Frustrated with the response from Shasta County and the red tape of rebuilding, Atkins called a community meeting in February to broach the issue. Fletcher and county Supervisor Leonard Moty were among those in attendance.

Atkins said county officials after the fire promised to streamline the permitting process and allow homes to be rebuilt without having to comply with updates to the building codes.

“Then they sent me a six-page letter of all the new codes I’d need to comply with on my house,” Atkins said. “So they told us we wouldn’t have to do all of this, then they turned around and told us we did.”

Fletcher and Moty acknowledged there had been some confusion about what the county could and could not do when it came to helping residents rebuild.

“To go to an earlier code provision, we just can’t do that,” Fletcher said. “California’s building code is adopted by the state, and of course we can’t enforce anything less than what the state requires.”

Moty said part of the responsibility fell on the county to clear up some issues, but a lot of confusion seemed to come from word-of-mouth and people not reaching out to the county.

“I don’t think we were clear enough telling people you have to rebuild to the current code,” he said. “(But) you can’t rely on the rumors or what your neighbor is saying. You need to call and tell us ‘here’s the issue.’”

The county did offset some up-front fees and got power out to the properties as soon as possible, but homeowners would ultimately have to pay those as well.

“That was designed to buy people as much time as possible and allow them to get with the insurance companies and what not,” he said. “While (the fire) was directed as a disaster, there was no federal or state relief, and the county itself just can’t afford to waive those fees.”

As of April 18, the county had issued 19 permits to rebuild in the Clover Fire’s aftermath.

For now, Atkins is staying with his wife and two kids in an Anderson rental covered by their insurance company. The fire changed their life, he said, but something about the independent spirit of his neighbors and a longtime relationship with the areas will keep him close.

Tamera Trent and her husband, Brian, lived on their Marsha Way home for more than 30 years before the fire came through. Afterward, leaving just wasn’t an option, the couple said. The road was named after Tamera’s aunt, whose branch of the family was the first to build on the remote stretch in 1977.

In the months that followed the couple stayed with Tamera Trent’s mother in Cottonwood, but with a steadfast determination the Trent family is on the path to rebuild. The framing for their three-bedroom, two-bath house was finished in late March and contractors recently finished installing insulation, plumbing and electrical wires.

“We have the Lord behind us,” Trent said. “We have a nicer home and a new home that we get to pick what goes in it. That’s what I mean by the Lord being behind us: we will be blessed in the end with this.”

Looking ahead

Tuffs of grass and other small plants have started to sprout through the ashy soil around Manton and Igo, but it will be decades or longer before the pines, oaks and other vegetation completely heal the scars of fire.

It takes a certain type of person to make a living in these more remote stretches of an already rural county. Yet that pioneering spirit may be the salvation of these communities. While some people chose not to rebuild, those who refused to be driven from their homes have dug deeper, planting roots that could last generations to come.

“For some people, to rebuild was just too much, while others say it’s a new landscape with a better view,” said Lori McCallum of Manton. “We’re just blessed to have such a great community.”

In the weeks after the fire, that community rallied to reconstruct the demolished Boole Water Ditch, which supplied irrigation water to a number of properties in the area. It was a major step in its recovery, allowing some functions of life to return to a sort of normal.

Ono-Igo Community Church pastor Ed Sulpice said he will always remember the tremendous outpouring of support from the community and others after the disaster, but as time passed people have made their tough decisions and started to move on with their lives.

“I don’t think there’s a lot of wondering anymore,” he said. “In terms of people that are going to rebuild, they’re on that path and the people that decided to leave have left.”

Shasta County’s Building Department said it is still there to help. Anyone trying to rebuild or in need of some guidance is encouraged to get in touch at 225-5761.

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