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Two years later, CZU fire recovery continues in Santa Cruz Mountains

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SANTA CRUZ – Two years have passed since a series of lightning strikes unleashed an unprecedented level of fire devastation in Santa Cruz County, flattening more than 900 residential homes and nearly 1,500 structures overall.

When the smoke cleared from the 2020 CZU Lightning Complex fire, the recovery process began and efforts to rebuild infrastructure, restore wildland and refine response efforts have been ongoing ever since.



A rare lightning storm crackles over Mitchell's Cove in Santa Cruz around 3 a.m. Aug. 16, 2020. The lightning strikes ignited several fires within the Santa Cruz Mountains, which grew to be the CZU August Lightning Complex fire. (Shmuel Thaler – Santa Cruz Sentinel file)

Rebuilding efforts

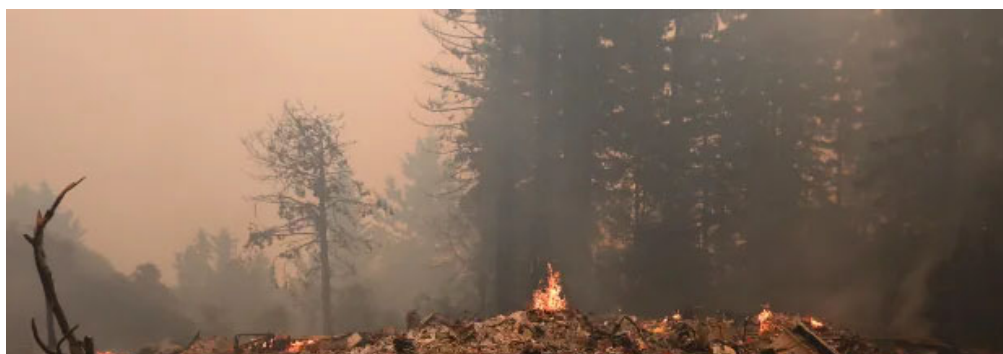
The fire started on Aug. 16, 2020 and [burned for 37 days](#), decimating 86,509 acres of land across Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties. The Sentinel reported that [911 homes were destroyed](#) in Santa Cruz County alone, primarily in northern county regions like Boulder Creek, Ben Lomond and Felton.

“It’s overwhelming to think about and even more overwhelming for the people who lived through it with their homes and lives at risk,” said District 3 Santa Cruz County Supervisor Ryan Coonerty, whose district includes much of the acreage destroyed by the fire. “It’s been on one hand, satisfying to see everyone pull together from the community ... to help each other in this time of need. The recovery has been slower than we wanted it to be.”

Coonerty said the county has made efforts to fast track and simplify permitting requirements falling under its purview, such as a 2021 amendment to a [geologic hazard code](#) that provided fire survivors with some recovery flexibility.

Earlier this year, the county launched a [recovery permit dashboard](#) that tracks the status of rebuilding efforts for residential and non-residential properties. As of Tuesday, 187 permits for single family dwelling units were in process, including 145 permits that have been issued or were ready for pickup, according to the dashboard.

Additionally, 152 properties have received the three county clearances necessary to submit dwelling unit permits, but have been unable to do so because of barriers outside of county control, such as insurance payout, financial considerations or technical consultant lead times. Santa Cruz County Spokesperson Jason Hoppin told the Sentinel that the county did not hear back from about one-third of the 911 impacted families.





Fire burns a home on Pine Hill Drive in Bonny Doon in August 2020. (Shmuel Thaler — Santa Cruz Sentinel file)

Wildland restoration

Big Basin Redwoods State Park – a beloved environmental treasure – has been working tirelessly on restoration projects of its own after about 97% of its trees were burned in the CZU fire.

Two years later, the park is well on its way to recovery. Most redwoods survived the fire and small shoots of light green new growth can be seen amongst the charred trunks. The park was able to [partially reopen](#) to day-use reservations in July and overnight camping options are expected to become available in the next three to five years.

“Not surprising,” said District 5 Supervisor Bruce McPherson of the encouraging new growth that has emerged. “Those magnificent redwoods that are 2,000 plus years old are very resilient.”

McPherson said he has been told by park representatives that it will be about a 10 year project to get the park back to something that resembles its former self.

“It’s another one of those understandably slow-moving processes to get it back to what a magnificent place it was and will be again,” he said.





The stark post-burn reality at Big Basin Redwoods State Park in August 2020. (Shmuel Thaler — Santa Cruz Sentinel file)

Fire outlook

While the county has managed to avoid a fire incident as severe as the CZU Lightning Complex in the past two years, the threat is still present and fire officials have remained vigilant.

In a [June presentation](#) to the board of supervisors, Cal Fire San Mateo-Santa Cruz Unit Fire Chief Nate Armstrong said that historic drought conditions in the region have persisted and created, as his team calls it, a “fire year.” This has extended what used to be a five to six month fire season to one that is nine to 10 months.

“There’s been a lot of increase in technology since the CZU fires,” said Cal Fire CZU Deputy Chief Jed Wilson. “These programs simulate what the fire’s going to do and where it’s going to impact which allows you to make a more educated decision in terms of strategies and tactics.”

Last week crews managed to stop forward progress on a 5 acre [wildland fire at DeLaveaga Park](#) within hours. Wilson said Cal Fire’s goal is to stop 95% of all fires from exceeding 10 acres.

At this point last year, 2,452 fires had been reported within Cal Fire’s jurisdiction, burning about 458,000 total acres. So far this year, 2,106 fires have occurred, with 14,500 acres burned.

The documentary “The CZU Fire In Their Own Words – Fighting Fires, Losing Homes, and Rebuilding Community,” tells the story of the 2020 fire and the community that survived it. A final screening will be held at 7:30 p.m., Tuesday at the Del Mar Theatre. The screening includes a Q&A with the director, Peter Gelblum.