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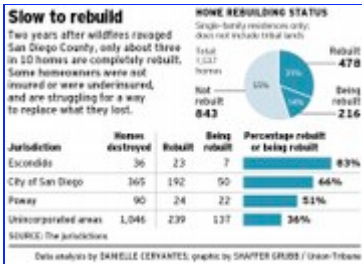


# The long road back

## Two years after wildfires, recovery for many residents has been belated

By [Jeff McDonald](#)  
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The Foyt family (from left) – Howard, son Austin and wife Brooke – lost their guesthouse in the Witch Creek fire of October 2007. They've had a series of difficulties in rebuilding and cleaning up their San Pasqual Valley property. (John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune) -

Shawn Ramirez (right), with boyfriend Matt Primo, built a new manufactured home at the Valley Oaks Mobile Ranch in Fallbrook after her last one burned down. (Charlie Neuman / Union-Tribune)





The Foyt family recovered some items after fire destroyed their guesthouse in San Pasqual Valley. (John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune)

School buses roll through on weekday mornings, past rows of vacant lots and “For Sale” signs before picking up the handful of children who still live at Valley Oaks Mobile Ranch in Fallbrook.

Out front, an ambitious sign touts the available space. “Design Your New Advantage Home Today!” it reads. There's another sign planted across Reche Road, in hand-painted block letters, advertising an estate sale at Space 77.

The opposing messages aren't lost on visitors to this hillside enclave west of Old Highway 395, where the Rice Canyon fire roared through two years ago this week and destroyed about half of the 213 mobile homes.

At Valley Oaks, the damage lingers.

“Did the fire end?” asked Cathie Majors, the park office manager who has wrestled with a flood of buyers, sellers, contractors and building officials since the catastrophe. “I'm not really sure the fire ended.”

The Rice Canyon blaze was only one in a spate of wildfires that broke out across San Diego County early in the week of Oct. 21, 2007.

Before the last flames were knocked down by the thousands of firefighters who poured into the region, the death toll would reach 10 and more than 1,600 homes would be lost.

Many of the affected areas have yet to recover. Through last week, 45 percent of homes that burned down had been issued permits to rebuild. About two-thirds of those have been completed, according to an analysis of city and county data by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*.

“Most of our residents didn't come back; they couldn't afford to,” said Majors, who tears up while talking about what happened. “A lot of our residents didn't have enough insurance. They owned their homes free and clear.”

### **Aggravating delays**

Despite progress in the rebuilding effort, effects of the 2007 wildfires are still smoldering for hundreds of victims.

The delays are caused by a variety of issues: lack of money, squabbles with insurance companies,

disputes with contractors and the slow process of obtaining permits.

“I’m ready to either commit suicide or murder,” said Brooke Foyt, who lost the guesthouse on her San Pasqual Valley property to the Witch Creek fire and has been struggling with her contractor. “They keep having excuses.”

Foyt said she’s tired of hearing how lucky she was not to have lost her home.

Construction trucks broke her sprinkler system, and her new landscaping withered. The place still reeks of ash; the insurance company quit paying storage fees; the builder installed the wrong windows; and they had to buy new carpets and drapes a second time because the replacements were soiled by fire and construction debris.

The Foyts can’t fire the contractor because the insurance money is held by a third-party administrator who has already paid the company two-thirds of the settlement. With a half-finished guesthouse in back, they can’t even sell.

“I would rather be in another house just living my life, instead of here, where we keep getting interrupted and delayed all of the time,” she said.

Shawn Ramirez has fully rebounded, but it was no small feat. She spent months filling out paperwork, checking with building officials and scraping for every spare dollar she could find once the Rice Canyon fire destroyed her Valley Oaks home.

After losing everything but the clothes she was wearing, Ramirez sold her space and rebuilt on a creek-side parcel down the street.

“It was nothing but rolling hills and dirt,” she said, pointing to her newly landscaped yard, where the sprinklers were feeding a freshly mowed lawn. “I had everything taken away in life, but now it has come back to me fuller.”

## **Widespread damage**

When the smoke cleared and fire crews returned home, officials began sizing up the overall wreckage.

Hundreds of square miles were scorched by flames that spared some homes while leveling others. Firefighters had wrapped whatever photos and mementos they could salvage in blankets and left them in front of burned-out houses.

The final toll was similar to damage caused by the October 2003 wildfires, in which 17 people died, about 2,600 homes were destroyed and more than 376,000 acres burned. The 2007 wildfires killed 10 people and burned 1,646 homes and 368,396 acres.

More than half of the houses that burned two years ago — 1,046 — were in unincorporated areas, which have issued a smaller proportion of rebuilding permits than cities and Indian reservations.

By last week, 239 houses and mobile homes had been rebuilt in unincorporated areas, the *Union-*

*Tribune's* analysis showed. Construction is under way on 137 others, and 39 applications are awaiting approval.

In San Diego, 365 homes and condominiums were lost, with the majority of the destruction in Rancho Bernardo, which was in the path of the Witch Creek fire.

Thin Tran, the development official who worked at the Rancho Bernardo recovery center until it closed this month, said the city did the best it could to fast-track building permit applications.

“We promised them a five- to 10-day turnaround,” Tran said. “For a normal house, it usually takes months to go through the whole process.”

Over the past two years, the city has issued 242 building permits for single-family residences, Tran said. More than three-quarters of those projects are completed and the homes occupied.

Poway lost 90 homes and has issued 46 building permits; Escondido had 36 homes destroyed and has permitted 30 replacement structures; all 59 homes that burned on the La Jolla Indian Reservation were permitted to rebuild; and at least six of the 50 homes lost on the Rincon reservation have been approved for reconstruction.

### **‘Better prepared’**

The lessons learned from the 2003 wildfires helped rescue crews and thousands of volunteers better manage their efforts during the 2007 disaster.

A network of recovery centers was set up to help fire victims deal with the crush of government agencies promising relief, insurance companies requesting documentation, planners checking permit applications and builders on the hunt for jobs.

Volunteers got the word out about fire safety and preparedness, and what to expect from insurers and contractors. They went online to update each other and match fire victims with resources.

In addition, local charities collaborated on specific programs to reduce redundancy.

“We learned a lot,” said Pastor Stephen Nichols of New Venture Christian Fellowship in Oceanside, who ran the Escondido recovery center before it closed this year. “The county as a whole is better prepared for any type of disaster going to the future, whether it's fires, flood, whatever.”

Michael Crain, a Fallbrook real estate broker who volunteers as president of the local community emergency-response team, said groups such as his are more adept at coordinating services than before.

Even so, the fire that ravaged his town affected every resident.


“Some moved. Some stayed. Some changed,” Crain said. “Everybody's a little different.”

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