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FUTURE

Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow 5-Year Recovery Update Report

Adopted by the Board of Supervisors
January 10, 2023



Burn Scar 2018



Burn Scar 2020



Purpose

Our community and County government will never forget the tragedy of the Thomas Fire, which began on December 4, 2017, and the debris flow that followed in Montecito on January 9, 2018. In the five years since those events, much has occurred to rebuild, repair and strengthen our resiliency. The purpose of the Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow Five-Year Recovery Update video presentation and report is to illustrate the progress by the County, Flood Control District, and critical community partners in facilitating whole community recovery following the Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow.

Background

This report illustrates the work that has taken place in the past five years following the Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow disasters.

The County's recovery effort over the last five years have been guided by the *Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow Recovery Strategic Plan*, presented to the Board of Supervisors in June 2018. The plan focused on meeting the medium and long-term needs of residents as they recovered and ensuring ongoing safety and security of County residents. The County's recovery objectives included:

1. Identify the issues that are important to the recovery and develop a plan to solve those issues
2. Ensure the public is provided information on the County's efforts in support of the community's recovery through all means available
3. Engage the public and elected officials to determine the best solutions for recovery and incorporate feedback into the plan
4. Utilize private and public partnerships in recovery efforts
5. Work with nonprofits to provide assistance where government services are not able to or where they need enhancement
6. Continue to prepare the communities for future storms and evacuations utilizing the best data possible
7. Develop plans and strategies to address the following issues:
 - a. Storm preparation and evacuation for the five years following the Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow.
 - b. Long-term mitigation efforts for future fire and storms
 - c. Rebuilding process for the different categories of damaged and destroyed properties
 - d. Communication strategies
8. Align plans for debris management on private property with the key issue areas to address each of the plan objectives. Further, the issue areas outlined in the Recovery Strategic Plan parallel the federal Recovery Support Functions (RSFs) aligned to the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF), supporting integration into State of California and federal structures for disaster recovery.

Summary

The County's and the Flood Control District's approach to the 1/9 Debris Flow effort emphasizes mitigating hazards/risks and associated safety concerns, educating the community on future storm or debris flow, minimizing future risks and addressing the community's need to rebuild quickly. As neighborhoods recovered from the Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow tragedy, the immediate goal was to help the community move forward by bringing together the collective resources of local government, nonprofit organizations, philanthropy and community groups to make strategic, inclusive decisions and create a more resilient Montecito. The concept of resilience – increasing the community's ability to withstand a future natural disaster and recovery more quickly – played a central role in the recovery. The recovery process will go through short-, mid-range and long-term recovery processes while maintaining the same guiding principles throughout.

Central to the County of Santa Barbara's role in the recovery effort was the development of the *Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow Disaster Recovery Strategic Plan*. This plan is comprised of eight strategic areas of focus to guide the various efforts. This document and the accompanying video show how the County and Flood Control District worked to satisfy the eight pillars.

1. Storm Preparation and Evacuation – The County developed an updated storm readiness plan for future years to address environmental changes and incorporated new data to ensure public safety.
2. Long Term Flood Control Mitigation – The development of long-term mitigation plans implemented by the Flood Control District, including several projects from the expansion of debris basins, the brand-new debris basin at Randall Road, revised cleanout plans, and replacing drainages.
3. Private Property Rebuilding – Extensive work has taken place to bring community members back into their homes. Planning and Development created the “Rebuilding Montecito” website providing resources to the community and an interactive map, to help property owners through the permitting process. The like-for-like ordinance amendment gave property owners a viable option for a streamlined permitting process.
4. Debris on Private Property – The sorting and clearing of debris on private property by County and community partners.
5. Financial Impacts and Economic Recovery – A comprehensive plan was developed to secure funding for additional hazard mitigation projects and facilitate long-term economic prosperity in the community. The majority of the 47-million dollars in estimated response cost has been or is in final review to be paid by FEMA & CalOES.
6. Infrastructure Repair and Modifications – The infrastructure of Montecito (non-flood control) including water, sanitary, natural gas, electrical, cable, cellular and roads sustained damage from the disaster. In the past five years extensive work was done to rebuild infrastructure. This includes everything from roads, bridges, and walkways to a Black Hawk helicopter.

7. Natural and Cultural Resources – Proactively worked with stakeholders to protect the natural and cultural resources on a case-by-case basis.

8. Community Engagement – The Montecito Center was a resource for the community during this challenging time. It connected those most impacted by the disaster with supportive services and resources. It helped guide those impacted through often complex government systems. The Community Wellness Team created in response still exist today.



ISSUE 1: Storm Preparation and Evacuation

Storm Preparation

Vegetation growth in the burn scar has nearly returned to pre-fire conditions at the five year mark. This growth has reduced the risk of debris-laden flooding. Each year following the debris flow, the risk assessment team consisting of experts in geology, forestry, fire, public safety and meteorology reviewed potential risks of the coming winter storm season. Evaluating the fragility of the hillside and the rainfall intensity rate that could cause flooding and debris flows. The team monitored incoming storms and issued warnings as necessary. Fortunately, there has not been an evacuation due to flooding or debris flow risk since March 2019. Community meetings to provide the latest updates have been held after each winter since 2018, with the last one held virtually on December 17, 2020.



Emergency Alerting

The Ready SBC reverse notification system and the County's protocols for emergency notification to the public continues to be enhanced through changes in technology, training, and additional review of effective messaging.

The County and our first responder agencies have adopted state-wide standardized terminology for evacuations.

Additionally, Spanish language notifications have been enriched through the County's Spanish Mass Alerting Generator. Spanish language support was further enhanced through the addition of Spanish speaking staff and certified translators to support these efforts.



ISSUE 2: Long-Term Flood Control Mitigations

Debris Basins

Following the debris flow Flood Control District went to work to initiate design on debris basins. Several debris basin locations were identified and to date many of them are completed or are currently under construction.

These include the completion of the brand-new debris basin at Randall Road. The Randall Road debris basin was largely made possible by the purchase of seven voluntarily offered parcels for the construction paid for with FEMA hazard mitigation funds. 92,100 cubic yards (CY) of dirt, debris and rocks were excavated.

Down the road at the Cold Springs Debris Basin, an expansion project excavated approximately 13,000 (CY) to create additional basin volume. It was completed in September 2020. The modifications made to the Romero Debris Basin will enhance the basin's ability to retain larger debris while passing less problematic sediment and cobble downstream. It was completed in October 2022. The modifications currently under construction at the Santa Monica Debris Basin will enhance access and maintenance operations, allowing for debris to be more quickly and efficiently removed from the basin. Construction is currently underway to complete several more.

Moving forward a master plan was created to develop comprehensive listing of feasible mitigations to further reduce future debris flows/risks.

Transportation Projects

County of Santa Barbara, Public Works also worked on several transportation projects. Bridges and drainages were replaced at Bella Vista at Romero, East Mountain Drive Bridge at San Ysidro Road and Cold Springs Creek as well as the replacement of Ashley Road Bridge.

These design efforts included consideration for evacuation and emergency response goals.



ISSUE 3: Private Property Rebuilding

Rebuilding

The debris flow damaged or destroyed 525 structures. Extensive work has taken place to bring community members back into their homes. Planning and Development created the “Rebuilding Montecito” website providing resources to the community and an interactive map, to help property owners through the permitting process. The “like-for-like” ordinance amendment gave property owners a viable option for a streamlined permitting process. By exempting projects from planning permits and the Montecito Board of Architectural Review if they were keeping the same design, size, scale and footprint.

The debris flow changed the landscape, so a survey control network was put in place to assist property owners and to establish property lines as well as properties owned by public agencies. As property owners researched options for rebuilding, some lot line adjustments were made. This is still an option for property owners as they are researching their options for rebuilding.

Flood Control District and Planning and Development are continuing to provide guidance through the rebuilding process, working with the latest FEMA flood recovery map.



Individual Case Managers

All impacted property owners were assigned a case manager to be a single point of contact. Find your case manager by clicking on the parcel on the Interactive Impacted Properties Map. If you wish to contact P&D, please call (805) 568-2090.



ISSUE 4: Debris on Private Property

The debris flow displaced a hillside of items including everything from cars to pieces of homes and boulders the size of buses.

In the weeks and months following the debris flow, teams worked to move destroyed cars to metal recyclers, work around massive boulders, properly dispose of hazardous waste, re-grade properties and move debris material off the site.

Along the way, the material was sorted.

Collaboration between cities helped develop a regional disaster debris management plan that included management of all types of disaster materials.



Community Partnerships

In the days following the debris flow The Santa Barbara Bucket Brigade formed. Neighbors helping neighbors, and giving strength to community members who wanted to help but didn't know how.



"It started with 50 people and one house and by summertime it had been 4,500 people and 100 homes. 66 acres of open space and miles of trail cleared.", said Bucket Brigade Founder, Abe Powell.

ISSUE 5: Financial Impacts and Economic Recovery

The 1/9 Debris Flow resulted in an estimated half billion dollars' worth of damage. Estimated response costs and damage to County infrastructure amounted to more than \$47 million. The majority of that has been paid or is in final review and to be paid by FEMA & CalOES.

The County was awarded with grants totaling more than \$6 million. Small Business Administration Loans were also provided to 61 homes and 80 businesses throughout the area, totaling to more than \$12 million.

Santa Barbara, CA	Home Loan Applications	Business Loan Applications	Total
Applications Issued	861	927	1,788
Applications Received	142	235	377
Applications Approved	61	80	141
Dollars Approved	\$6,882,700	\$5,451,000	\$12,333,700

FEMA also provided individual housing assistance to 383 applicants.

Community groups also came together to help individuals.

805 Undocufund distributed more than one-million dollars to families impacted by the Thomas Fire and Debris Flow. The majority of this money going to undocumented service workers.

The County and Flood Control District continue to pursue a variety of federal and state grants to fund the installation of new protection measures and various other long-term funding options for maintenance.

ISSUE 6: Infrastructure Repair and Modifications

The County transportation network experienced over \$27 million in damage from the fire and subsequent debris flow. Every aspect of transportation infrastructure was affected - bridges, roads, drainage systems, trees, walkways, and traffic control systems. Rebuilding these facilities were essential to provide access for emergency services, debris removal, rebuilding, and resiliency for the future. Over \$10 million in paving restored and improved 26 lane miles of roads throughout the community.



Community Partnerships

The County collaborated with residents to ensure that new structures met design requirements while being context sensitive to this semi - rural community. During reconstruction of roadways, the department collaborated with Bucket Brigade to restore walkability in the community. Bucket Brigade, together with the County, did extensive outreach on a property - by - property basis to create safe, walkable paths along many roads throughout Montecito.

The community coming together also led to the collaboration of the County with The Project for Resilient Communities to work on getting additional protection measures in place. This partnership led to the construction of six debris nets. The nets are intended to capture debris flows in the canyons located above the community of Montecito.



Equipment Additions & Upgrades

County fire added a Black Hawk helicopter. So instead of hoisting and carrying up to four passengers during a major incident, the new helicopter can carry more than a dozen individuals at one time. In addition, multilevel utility terrain vehicles were added.

The Sheriff's Office updated its patrol and administration vehicles with Hi-Lo sirens. A unique European sounding siren that will be used to alert the community during an evacuation.



ISSUE 7: Natural and Cultural Resources

The Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow spanned across many natural and cultural resources. Santa Barbara County was sensitive to that, and proactively considered the needs of cultural resources. As the community was put back together following the debris flow cultural resource identification and protection was assessed on a case by case basis when rebuilding efforts were initiated on impacted properties.



1. Identified cultural enhancements and preservation during recovery actions
2. Prevented damage to natural and cultural resources during recovery actions such as infrastructure repairs, debris removal and reconstruction
3. Prevented further damage to natural and cultural resources impacted by the Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow
4. Coordinated with resource specialists from internal and external agencies, tribal communities and other stakeholders to support restoration of impacted natural and cultural resources

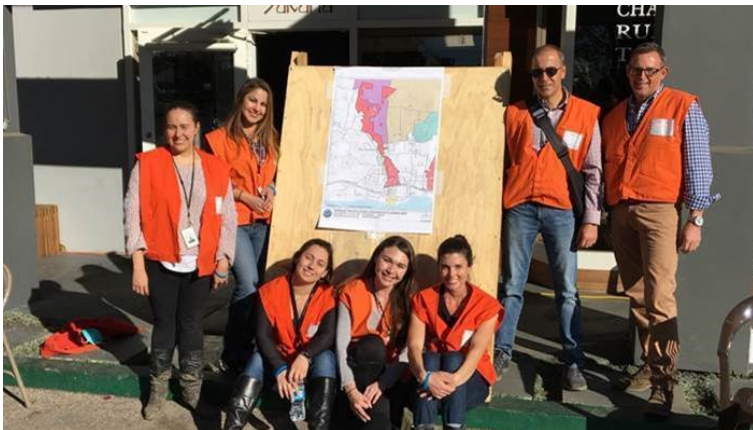
ISSUE 8: Community Engagement

To provide resources, a place of connection, and ongoing support to the community, the County operated the Montecito Center for Preparedness, Recovery and Rebuilding from March through September 2018 with community partners including the Orfalea Foundation, United Way and the Community Wellness Team. After the center closed, County staff continues to provide coordination and case management assistance to residents through the departments of Planning and Development, Public Works, Behavioral Wellness, and First District Supervisor Das Williams' office.



Community Wellness Team

One of the primary mental health resources was the Community Wellness Team (CWT), a collaboration of local agencies working together to support the wellness of our communities. In response to the Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow, the CWT added California HOPE 805 to the team. Services provided included crisis counseling, grief/bereavement counseling, psychological first aid, spiritual care, first responder critical incident stress debriefing, and short and long-term counseling to intensive outpatient care offered through Cottage Health. In total, more than 20,000 services were provided. The Community Wellness Team continues to provide ongoing mental health support to the community. For information, go to sbccwt.org.



"It was not intended that the community wellness team would continue. It was formed specifically for the response to the debris flow, but it has. Five years later, that same team has formed together around multiple traumatic events that have happened within our community and have been there and operated and are still going strong," said Suzanne Grimmesey with Santa Barbara County Behavioral Wellness.

Conclusion

The last five years have shown us that we are one resilient County. The County along with community partners were able to fulfill these eight pillars and support and advance the recovery of the community. While work still remains our community is ready and prepared now, more so than ever before. Following the debris flow the South Coast was unrecognizable. Here we are five years late and the regrowth of not only the land but the community has shown us that we are “One County with One Future”.

