



### A34 Butte County's Response to the 2018 California Camp Fire

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how the Butte County Sheriff's Office responded to the Camp Fire, now the deadliest wildfire in California history. This presentation provides information on the response operations of the Butte County Sheriff's Office.

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** The Camp Fire was the second of two back-to-back disasters in Butte County within 18 months. The first disaster took place in February of 2017 when the Oroville Dam Spillway failed. Knowledge gained from the spillway incident was subsequently applied when Butte County responded to the Camp Fire. This presentation discusses the lessons learned after responding to two mass disaster situations, but will primarily focus on the recovery efforts initiated in response to the Camp Fire, especially how Butte County navigated the ever-changing landscape of disaster response and the flexibility needed to adapt to unpredictable challenges.

The Northern California Camp Fire started around 6:15 a.m. on November 8, 2018, in a remote area of Butte County near the small community of Pulga in the Sierra Nevada foothills. From its origin, the fire was driven northwest by intense winds (up to 55mph). Jumping from ridge to ridge, it was estimated that the fire consumed approximately 80 acres per minute. The fire quickly pushed through the community of Concow. At 7:45 a.m., a spot fire was reported in eastern Paradise. By 8:45 a.m., the fire had progressed halfway through the town of Paradise and by noon, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) had issued an order for fire resources to begin pushing cars off the roads to unblock escape routes. The fire continued to aggressively burn toward the surrounding communities of Oroville and Chico. At 9:08 p.m., fire personnel retreated out of Honey Run Canyon reporting that they "lost everything." In all, the communities of Concow, Paradise, Magalia, and Butte Creek Canyon were destroyed in less than 12 hours. Despite the danger and potential loss of life, Butte County first responders succeeded in evacuating 52,000 residents from the area.

Following the Camp Fire, a number of communication challenges arose. Dispatch centers became inundated with phone calls from people needing help or looking for loved ones. Coroner units were forced to use cell phones to communicate, but the fire had destroyed many cell phone towers, leading to widespread areas without cellular reception. Teams attempted to limit radio traffic to reduce the spread of information to the media.

As the magnitude of the incident became apparent, and the fatality count continued to rise, assistance was requested from throughout the state and neighboring states. Fifty-five of the 58 counties in California sent personnel to assist in recovery efforts. Search and Rescue (SAR) teams arrived from Oregon, Nevada, Texas, and Ohio. During the peak of the operation from November 9 to November 25, the daily personnel included 200 law enforcement officers, 500 SAR volunteers, 50 personnel assigned to SAR Overhead teams, 300 fire urban SAR personnel, 300 National Guard search personnel, 70 National Guard support personnel, 55 coroner investigators, 45 anthropologists, 4 forensic odontologists, 10 morgue personnel from Sacramento County, 5 DNA specialists, 3 crime analysts, 5 morgue support personnel, 3 pathologists, 25 canine units, one person from Alameda County doing aerial mapping, and approximately 200 miscellaneous support personnel.

As recoveries progressed, the focus shifted to decedent identification efforts. An ANDE® Rapid DNA machine was established at the Sacramento County Coroner's Office for victims' DNA. Butte County obtained next-of-kin DNA profiles to compare with the decedents' DNA profiles. By November 20, 17 of the 79 victims had been positively identified by DNA. One month later, by December 20, the fatality count had increased to 85 with 48 of the victims positively identified using DNA. Currently, nearly eight months later, the decedent count stands at 85 with 79 of the victims positively identified. Collaborative efforts are ongoing between Butte County and ANDE® to identify the remaining six victims.

Before it was ultimately contained on November 25, 2018, the Camp Fire consumed 153,336 acres and 18,793 structures, and resulted in the deaths of 85 people. To date, the Camp Fire is the deadliest and most destructive fire in California history, the sixth-deadliest wildfire in United States history, and the world's most costly natural disaster in 2018. From this fire, Butte County learned to navigate the ever-changing landscape of mass disaster response and how to best prepare for future mass fatality incidents.

#### Mass Disaster Preparation, Wildfire Victim Identification, Mass Fatality Response