

Wildfire: The Camp Fire in Paradise

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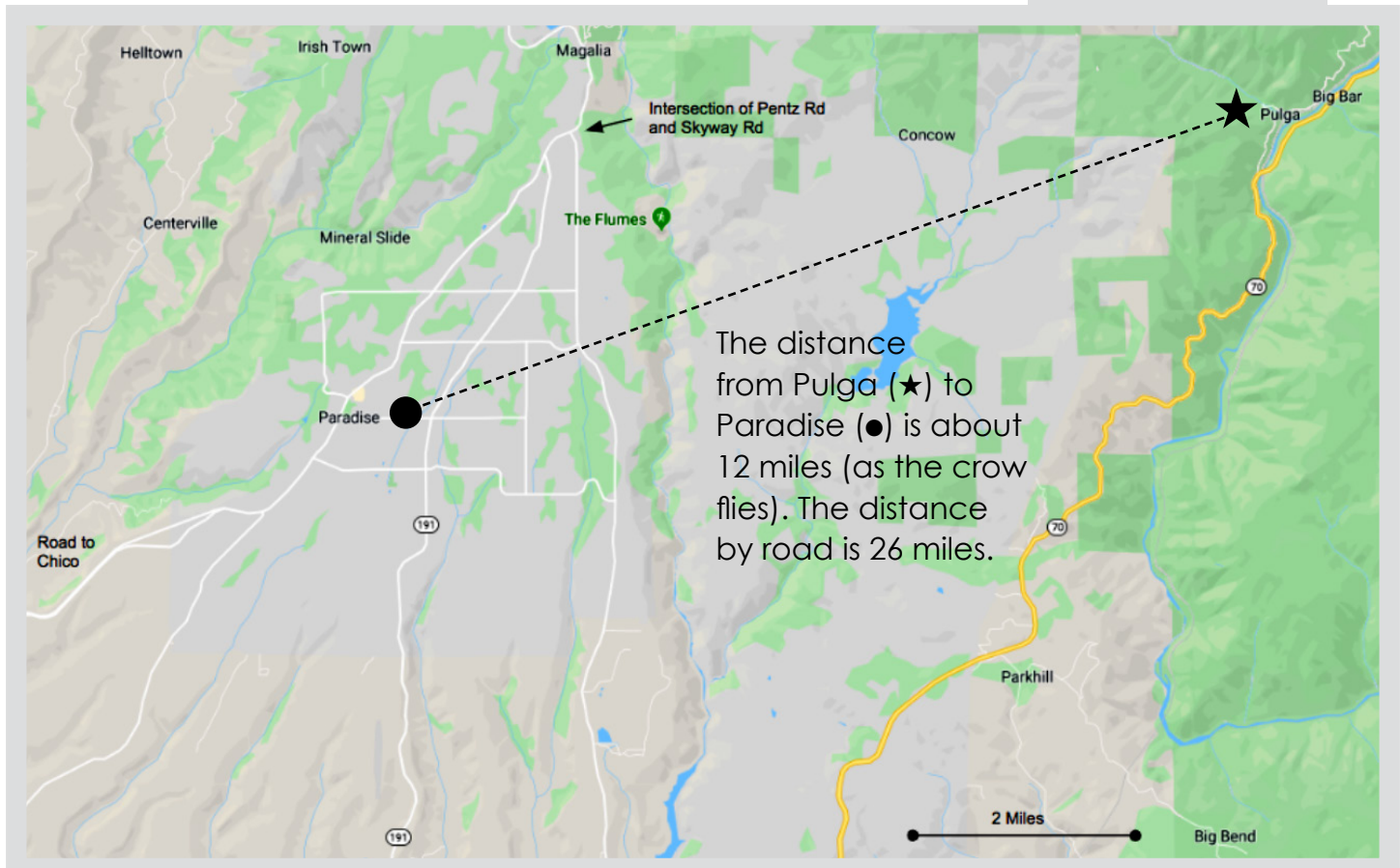
One of the deadliest and most destructive wildfires in the history of California started in a rural area 90 miles north of Sacramento.

Summary

The Camp Fire started at approximately 5:30 a.m. on November 8, 2018. The location of the fire was near Pulga Road (see ★ on map below), east of the town of Paradise, in Butte County. The fire was started by downed power lines due to high winds. Dry grass and leaves, pine needles, twigs, and other dead brush fueled the fire as it began to grow.

In addition, the rough terrain made firefighting difficult, and the flying embers carried by the strong winds would eventually spread the fire to nearby homes and lead to the devastation of the town of Paradise. The fire caused over 150,000 acres to burn, forcing at least 52,000 people to evacuate. It also destroyed over 18,000 structures including 9,000 homes. Tragically, 85 people lost their lives in the fire, making it the deadliest wildfire in U.S. history in the past 100 years.

Pulga (★) is a rural community in Butte County, California. It is located along the west slope of the Feather River canyon, at an elevation of 1,398 feet.

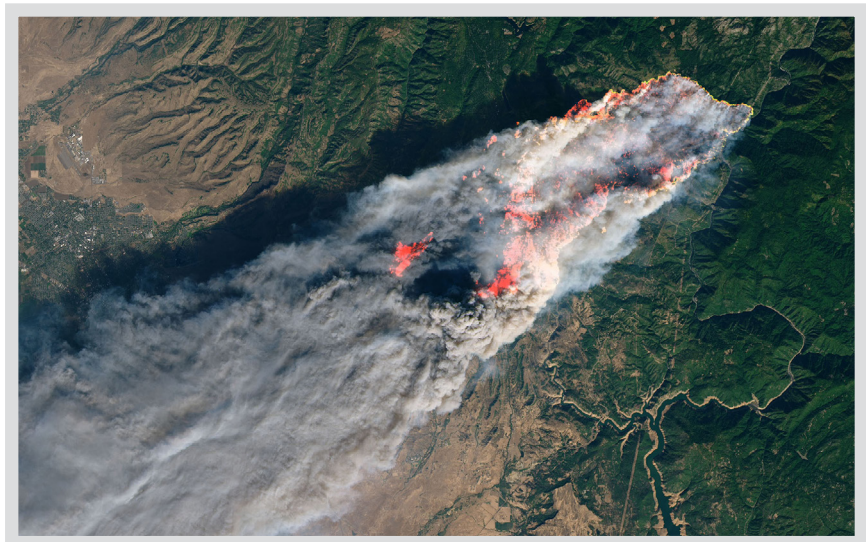


The Start of the Fire

On the morning of November 8, there was a high wind advisory in effect for the Paradise area. At 5:30 a.m. a call came in to a 911 operator about a fire in Pulga, a small, *rural* community in the mountains. At first there was no need for alarm, but what seemed like the start of a regular day would soon change.

At 7:19 a.m. a teacher driving to school reported that the sky in Paradise looked orange. At 7:30 a.m. there was another call into 911 from a person driving to Paradise who wondered if it was safe to drive into town. The 911 operator stated that there was a large fire in the Pulga area, but was unaware that strong winds were moving the fire quickly towards the town of Paradise. Shortly after 7:30 a.m., a police officer reported that ash had started raining down on the town, and the 911 operator was getting calls of homes being on fire in the Pulga area. By 7:41 a.m. the first report of a home on fire in Paradise was recorded. From 7:45 a.m. on, calls from the community to the 911 continued nonstop—too many to handle.

At this same time Thursday morning, thousands of people were in their cars, on their way to work, or already at their jobs. Over 3,800 students were getting ready to begin their day at local schools. The fire was becoming an obvious threat. Many of the 40,000 people living in Paradise were alerted by 911 operators and first responders, already out on the roads, to evacuate the town.



File: Camp Fire oli 2018312 Landsat.jpg by Joshua Stevens (NASA). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Camp_Fire_oli_2018312_Landsat.jpg (accessed January 30, 2020).

Evacuation

Throughout the community of Paradise, people were desperately trying to evacuate and get away from the fire. A *rural* community in the mountains, Paradise had few roads leading out of town. The evacuation quickly became a problem. Knowing the traffic patterns of the town, a few police officers headed to the intersection of Pentz and Skyway roads, where traffic was already at a standstill. The air was smoky, and the tops of burning trees could be seen. One resident fleeing with her ill son remembers sitting in her car at the intersection for 40 minutes before she was able to begin driving.

Evacuation efforts continued throughout the day. Rescue workers and first responders combed the area where the fire had not yet reached to warn people to leave their homes immediately. People who called 911 were told to get out on their own, as there were not enough rescue workers available to help them. Some people refused to leave their homes.

Help and Support for the Community

Firefighters from all over California and neighboring states came to help stop the fire. Large tanker aircraft were flown in to drop fire retardant ahead of the fire to slow or stop the fire's progress. It took 17 days to contain the fire.

Organizations, such as the American Red Cross, set up shelters all over Butte County. Shelters equipped with beds, bathrooms, showers, food, and other supplies supported many thousands of family members and citizens who had nowhere else to go. The California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) and many partner agencies worked tirelessly to provide workers, supplies, equipment, and other types of support to the community. Support efforts included supplies for shelters, volunteers to help the American Red Cross, and additional fire engines and equipment to support the firefighters. Agencies also provided healthcare workers such as doctors, nurses, and veterinarians to assist people, their pets, and livestock.

The Aftermath

After the fire, one task was to help families find their loved ones. There were 18,000 buildings that burned down, and each one was visited by a team of law enforcement officers and firefighters in search of clues for missing people. It was the largest search and rescue operation ever conducted in California.

Many of the homes, businesses, and public buildings were lost due to building-to-building fires. A building-to-building fire is when a fire starts in one building and spreads to the next building. Building-to-building fires accounted for a majority of the damaged and destroyed homes in the area. Among the buildings lost, 8 of the 9 schools in Paradise were destroyed, affecting over 3,800 students. As a result of the lost schools, many students and teachers had to relocate and attend classes in neighboring cities. Many teachers and students who called Paradise home lost everything they owned. They had to rely on surrounding communities to help meet their needs.

When the fire was contained, it was determined that 240 square miles had been burned and that 30,000–40,000 people were homeless. At one point, over 1,000 people were unaccounted for. Eventually, it was determined that 85 people died from the fire, making it the deadliest wildfire in U.S. history in the past 100 years.



Photos above courtesy of Kindra Britt.

The Camp Fire caused the evacuation of **over 52,000 people**. This is approximately the seating capacity of a professional football stadium. Each of these people has a story about the fire and his or her evacuation. The **two stories** that follow share a glimpse of what November 8 was like for two different groups of people.

Wildfire Story 1

At one elementary school, children on the playground ran back into the school building to tell their teacher that branches were on fire and landing where they were playing. The wind was that strong. Teachers were instructed to move the children from the school building onto a bus and to evacuate the town. Immediately they were caught in the traffic standstill. The bus was hot and smoky with buildings burning on either side of the bus. It was so dark on the bus at 10:00 a.m. that the young children asked if it was nighttime. The bus traveled down a narrow road with tall trees on both sides until the traffic stopped again. Smoke was now causing the students to fall asleep. Thinking strategically, the bus driver took off his cotton shirt and told the teachers to tear it up to make air filters for the students. They had a single bottle of water on the bus, and they used it to wet the shirt fabric for the makeshift air filters. These brave students and adults were on that bus for six hours before they reached a safe area outside of the fire's reach.

Wildfire Story 2

At another location in town, by 10:42 a.m. it was already too late to evacuate. The Skyway Road escape route was on fire, and about 150 people were trapped in their cars at the corner of Skyway and Clark. Rescue workers used megaphones to tell people to abandon their cars and evacuate on foot as 80-foot flames approached the town. However, there was nowhere to run. The rescue workers looked over the situation and determined the best place to go was a nearby building. They broke in and directed the people to lie down on the cement slab of the building floor. There was a propane tank storage field next door. As the fire approached the building, these tanks began to explode due to the heat. The explosions sounded like bombs going off, and the vibrations could be felt by everyone. For hours the people waited and prayed as the fire raged around them. Miraculously, the building in which they were sheltered did not burn.

Wildfire Hazard Risk in California

Wildfires are the third most prolific hazard in the state of California, with many people living in or near fire hazard areas. Many homes and businesses are under threat due to their proximity to the wildland-urban interface in which community developments are situated next to high vegetation areas. In recent decades, more acreage has burned than in the past 60 years and as the climate continues to change, these fires are expected to worsen in future years.

