

Rain could hinder search for victims of California wildfires

By **Sudhin Thanawala**
The Associated Press

PARADISE, California — The search for remains of victims of the devastating Northern California wildfire has taken on new urgency as rain in the forecast could complicate those efforts while also bringing relief to firefighters on the front lines.

Up to 400 people fanned out Sunday to search the ash and rubble where homes once stood before flames roared through the Sierra foothills town of Paradise and surrounding communities, killing at least 77 people in the deadliest U.S. wildfire in a century.

Wearing white coveralls, hard hats and masks, teams of volunteers and search and rescue crews poked through the smoky debris for fragments of bone before rains can wash them away or turn loose, dry ash into a thick paste. The so-called Camp Fire has destroyed more than 10,500 homes.

A team of 10 volunteers, accompanied by a cadaver dog, went from house to house in the charred landscape. They scrutinized the rubble in five-minute sweeps, using sticks to move aside debris and focused on vehicles, bathtubs and what was left of mattresses.

When no remains were found, they spray-painted a large, orange "0" near the house and moved on.

Robert Panak, a volunteer on a team from Napa County, said he tried to picture the house before it burned and think where people might have hidden. His morning search was fruitless, but he wasn't deterred.

"I just think about the positives, bringing relief to the families, closure," Panak said.

Sheriff Kory Honea said it was within the "realm of possibility" officials would never know the exact death toll from the blaze. He also questioned whether the search for remains could be completed by midweek when rain is forecast.

"As much as I wish we could get through all of this before the rains come, I don't know if that's possible," Honea said.

About 1,000 names remain on a list of people unaccounted for more than a week after the fire began in Butte County about 140 miles north of San Francisco, authorities said.

Authorities don't believe all those on the list are missing and the roster dropped by 300 on Sunday as more people were located or got in touch to say they weren't missing.

On Sunday afternoon, more than 50 people gathered at a memorial for the victims at First Christian Church in Chico, where a banner on the altar read, "We will rise from the ashes."

People hugged and shed tears as Pastor Jesse Kearns recited a prayer for first firefighters, rescuers and search teams: "We ask for continued strength as they are growing weary right now."

Paul Stavish, who retired three months ago from a Silicon Valley computer job and moved to Paradise, placed a battery-powered votive candle on the altar as a woman played piano and sang "Amazing Grace."

Stavish, his wife and three dogs managed to escape the fire, but the house is gone. He said he was thinking of the dead and also mourning the warm, tight-knit community.

"This is not just a few houses getting burned," he said. "The whole town is gone."

Hundreds of search and recovery personnel are involved in the effort, going to homes where they received tips someone might have died.

But they are also doing a more comprehensive, "door-to-door" and "car-to-car" search of areas, said Joe Moses, a commander with the Monterey County Sheriff's Office, who is helping oversee the search and rescue effort.

The search area is huge, Moses said, with many structures that need to be checked.

The fire also burned many places to the ground, creating a landscape unique to many search-and-rescue personnel, he said.

"Here we're looking for very small parts and pieces, and so we have to be very diligent and systematic in how we do your searches," he said Friday.

The death count only grew by one Sunday and firefighters managed to expand containment to 65 percent of the 234 square mile (606 sq. kilometers) burn zone.

Rain was forecast for midweek in the Paradise area. The National Weather Service said the area could get 20 mph sustained winds and 40 mph gusts, which could make it hard for crews to keep making progress against the blaze.

Florida recounts go to GOP

By **Gary Fineout**
The Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Florida — This was the year Florida's Democrats spoke ambitiously of ending their 20-year journey in political exile in this battleground state. Instead, election results after a tense and bruising recount showed Republicans coming out on top for governor and even picking up a U.S. Senate seat.

After a recount dragged on for nearly two weeks, top Democratic candidates in the state came agonizingly close but fell short of their avowed goal.

Democratic candidate for governor Andrew Gillum conceded Saturday, followed by three-term incumbent U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson a day later. More than 8 million voters weighed in — a far higher turnout than in past midterm elections — but the result was the same for Democrats.

When official returns were posted Sunday, Republican Gov. Rick Scott led Nelson in the Senate race by slightly more than 10,000 votes. Republican Ron DeSantis edged out Gillum, Florida's first African-American nominee for governor, by more than 32,000 votes. State officials will certify the official results Tuesday.

The close of nearly two weeks of high political drama in the presidential swing state likely spelled the end of the political career of the 76-year-old Nelson. First elected to Congress 40 years ago, Nelson had been a Democratic survivor in an era when Republicans swept to power in Florida in the '90s. He was first elected to the U.S. Senate in 2000 and was seeking a fourth term.

"It has been a rewarding journey as well as a very humbling experience," Nelson said in a videotaped statement. "I was not victorious in this race but I still wish to strongly reaffirm the cause for which we fought: A public office is a public trust."

The political journey, however, appears to still be unfolding for Gillum, who ran on a liberal platform that included expanding Medicaid and raising taxes to spend more on education — both potential hard sells in the GOP-controlled Legislature.

In his concession video, Gillum told supporters to "stay tuned" about his next move.

"Although nobody wanted to be governor more than me, this was not just about an election cycle," said the 39-year-old Tallahassee mayor. "This was about creating the type of change in this state that really allows for the voices of everyday people to show up again in our government, in our state,

and in our communities. We know this fight continues."

In an interview on Fox & Friends on Monday morning, DeSantis called Gillum "a very formidable opponent."

"He was the only one that inspired anybody with enthusiasm. ... He was really responsible for driving a lot of these Democrats to vote who don't normally vote in midterm elections. So ... it was a tough fight."

Now, ahead of the 2020 presidential election, it will be Republicans again in firm control in Florida. A Scott victory means Florida will now have two Republican senators while padding the chamber's Republican majority.

Nelson, a Florida native with a distinct twang, fought a hard and acrimonious race against Scott, a multimillionaire businessman and relative newcomer who jumped into politics eight years ago and was urged to run this time by President Donald Trump.

And it was the third time Scott barely edged out a Democratic opponent.

"Now the campaign truly is behind us, and that's where we need to leave it," Scott said in a statement after official results were posted. "We must do what Americans have always done: come together for the good of our state and our country. My focus will not be on looking backward, but on doing exactly what I ran on: making Washington work."

Scott, who was also interviewed by Fox & Friends on Monday morning, said Nelson was "gracious" when he called him on Sunday to congratulate him.

"I told him if he has any ideas of how to do my job better, don't hesitate to call me," Scott said. "I represent everybody in my state."

Trump congratulated Scott on Twitter: "From day one Rick Scott never wavered. He was a great Governor and will be even a greater Senator in representing the People of Florida. Congratulations to Rick on having waged such a courageous and successful campaign!"

While Scott and Nelson disagreed on such key issues as gun control, health care and the environment, their campaign focused primarily on attacking each other's character and competence.

Scott bashed his rival as ineffective and out-of-touch in TV ads paid for by more than \$60 million of the Republican's own money.

Nelson branded Scott as a Trump follower who used the governor's office to pad his wealth.



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