

# This is what Paradise looks like five years after devastating Camp Fire

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Newly built homes are seen along Sawmill Road in Paradise (Butte County) on Oct. 26, less than a month before the five-year anniversary of the Camp Fire.



PARADISE, Butte County — Aromas of cumin and garlic enveloped the small restaurant kitchen where Maria Garcia tossed sizzling beef in one skillet, chili verde in another.

Preparing for the lunch crowd in a town that was nearly wiped off the map by wildfire is a gamble, even five years later.

The line of customers — construction workers, tree crews, school district employees — sometimes spills out the front door of Maria's Kitchen, a homey Mexican food restaurant with a wood-burning stove on Elliott Road in Paradise.

But too often, only a few hungry souls trickle in for tamale platters and tostadas. The 2018 Camp Fire destroyed more than 90% of the town's homes and scattered its residents. Five years later, the population is about one-third of what it once was.



Maria Garcia, owner of Maria's Kitchen in Paradise, takes a plate to a customer after cooking the order. Garcia's restaurant, which opened months before the 2018 Camp Fire, was spared with only a scorched sign and fence corner. Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

Garcia, who lost her home but whose restaurant survived, said she's content waiting for the town to bounce back. But she has sensed in recent months that traffic has slowed. Barren lots still sprawl across the street where apartments and a Safeway shopping center once stood. Apart from a pair of duplexes and a tire shop, there's little left on the block to draw people looking for something to eat.

"It would be very good for us if they rebuild," Garcia said.

Paradise officials proudly tout the town's multiyear reign since the fire as the fastest-growing city in California. Construction is everywhere. Potholed roads are being ripped up and repaved. Framed new houses are sprinkled across the iron-rich red dirt of empty lots.

Yet, many residents admit that five years haven't brought as much progress as they'd hoped, stalled by the pandemic and rising building costs. Of the 11,000 homes that were destroyed in the fire, town officials say just 2,115 have been rebuilt.

Terrible facts loom over Paradise's rebirth: 85 people killed when the fire roared into town; an unknown number of others who died in the aftermath as they struggled with injuries and

other traumas; at least one-third of businesses gone; 300,000 trees charred beyond recovery; thousands of residents who moved away, never to return.



Neville Smith, left, and Michael Delarosa work to add siding to a nearly finished home in Paradise. Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

The Camp Fire could have remained the worst wildfire in modern U.S. history, the most extreme. But similar forces collided on Maui in August: drought, overgrown vegetation, wicked winds and sparks from power lines (though Maui investigators haven't confirmed what started the fire). The town of Lahaina, like Paradise, was all but wiped away, with the death toll now at 98 for Maui.



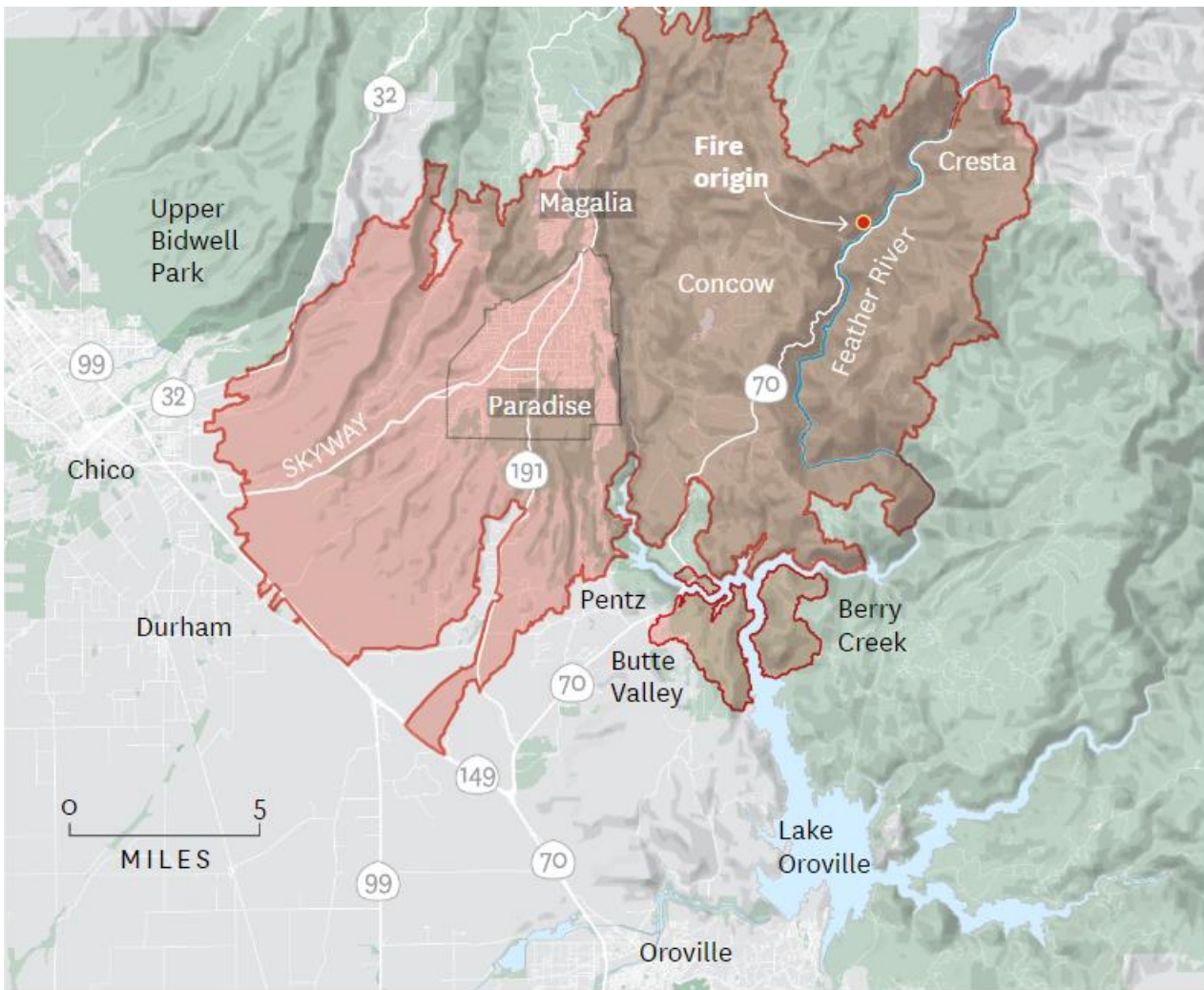


Chart: John Blanchard / The Chronicle • Source: Cal Fire

Colette Curtis, director of recovery and economic development for Paradise, said Maui's suffering has resurfaced awful memories. "It felt apocalyptic, like nothing could ever resemble normal again. It was hard to see a way through it," she said.

Yet five years later, progress is everywhere in Paradise. There are stunning new school campuses; more Little League teams; and power lines put underground by Pacific Gas & Electric Co., whose equipment started the fire. Paradise is also closer to building its first sewer system for the downtown district to shift businesses off outdated septic systems. And officials are working on new street designs to reduce traffic jams in future evacuations. It's not enough, not yet.



A sign is seen in front of charred trees along Skyway in Paradise. The Camp Fire began when a century-old hook that PG&E allowed to deteriorate failed. In 2020, PG&E's then-CEO pleaded guilty to 84 counts of criminal involuntary manslaughter on behalf of the company and settled with the town for \$270 million.

Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

In 2018, Paradise was home to 26,500 people. By the end of that year, the figure had dropped 95%. The 2020 census put the population at just over 4,000. By January, the department of finance data put the town's residents above 9,000.

The Camp Fire began when a century-old hook that PG&E allowed to deteriorate failed, dropping energized wires into drought-parched brush. In 2020, PG&E's then-CEO pleaded guilty to 84 counts of criminal involuntary manslaughter on behalf of the company and settled with the town for \$270 million. The money is giving Paradise about 20 years to bounce back before its budget must operate in the black, Curtis said. For a bedroom community sustained by property taxes, getting back to that pre-fire threshold will become crucial.

"We need more people to move here; we need more businesses to open," Curtis said.

There are stalwarts like Garcia, who reopened the restaurant as soon as water, electricity and gas services were restored. "I needed to work," she said. Her brother soon arrived from Texas to help rebuild her family's home. There are new ventures too.



Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

Aaron Singer, left, executive director and head coach of Paradise Stronger, a nonprofit gym and community center, works out with Les Dalrymple, 22, of Chico, in Paradise. Singer, who was a medical technician at the now shuttered Feather River Hospital, opened the facility in hopes of rebuilding after the 2018 Camp Fire that destroyed much of the town.

Aaron Singer used to work as a medical technician at the Feather River Medical Center in Paradise, but the fire prompted him to make a change, especially once he realized the hospital would not reopen. In 2021, Singer and his wife opened a nonprofit gym and community center called Paradise Stronger, modeled after YMCAs.

Singer renovated a former thrift store to create not only a gym but also community rooms, including a kitchen with free food and living room with books, toys and a big TV for family movie nights and football games.

On a recent day, Singer called out instructions to a half-dozen people grunting and sweating through squats. They'd become a tight-knit group. An emergency medical technician who lost her home in the fire, then got a divorce, and said the people who came back are deeply loyal. A retired grocery store butcher who said life feels so much more meaningful after losing everything. A 22-year-old student who drives up from Chico because no other gym has quite the same community feeling.

Paradise Stronger has eight fitness coaches and about 250 members — but Singer admits he had thought they'd have more by now. He's shifted to seeking grants to provide classes for schools, nonprofits and government groups, a model that might better sustain the gym.

“There are still people living in their cars or trailers,” Singer said. “They need a place to break away and relax.”



Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

Two travel trailers are seen near burn scars from the 2018 Camp Fire along Skyway in Paradise. In 2018, Paradise was home to 26,500 people. In January, department of finance data put the town's population at about 9,000.

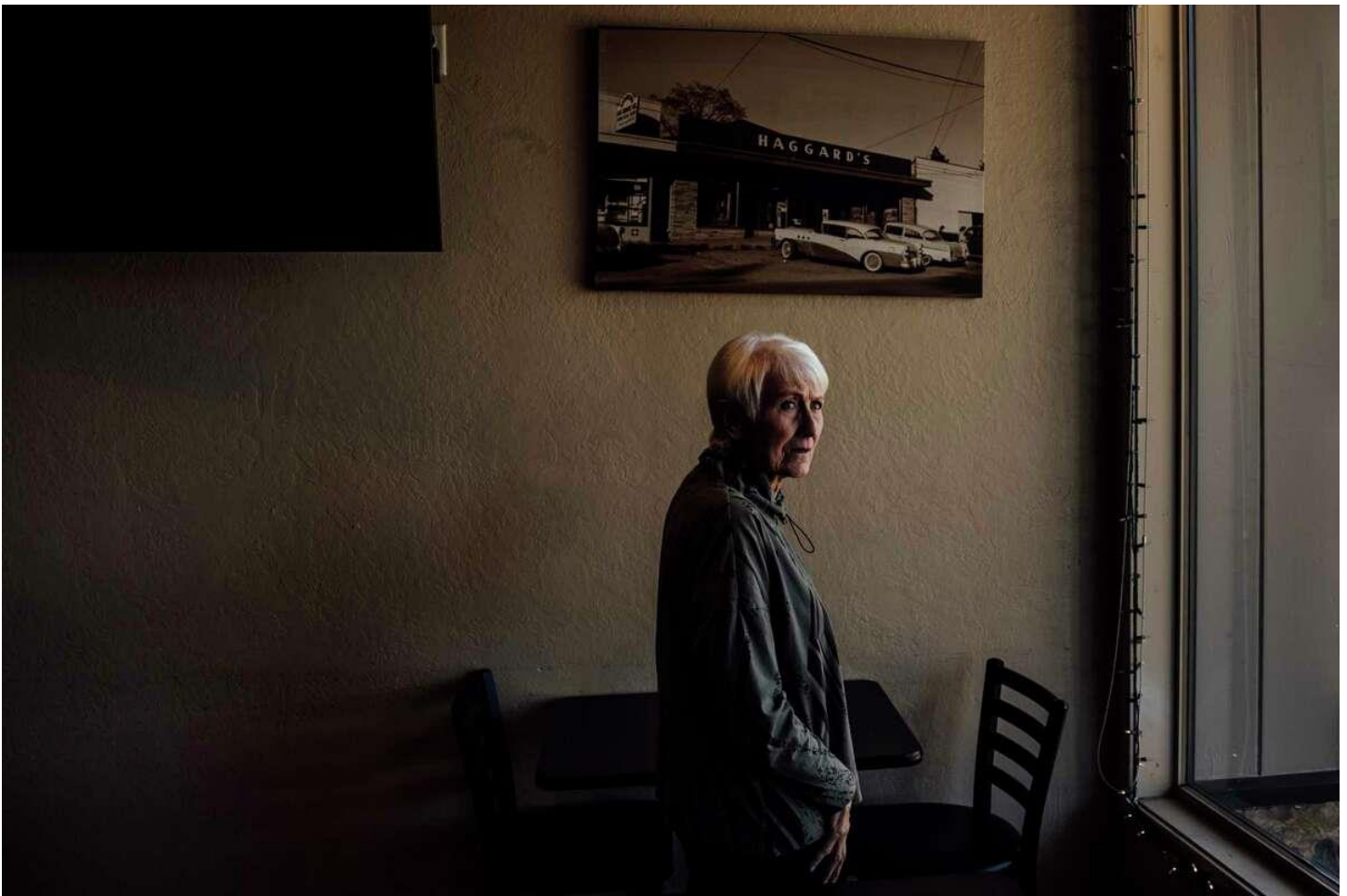
Town officials were poised to end emergency rules allowing people to live in trailers on their burned-out properties, but recognizing the long road of rebuilding, they extended allowances for RV dwellers with building permits in hand. Still, property owners are struggling to find affordable property insurance as many companies have responded to the state's wildfire crisis by ceasing to write new policies.



Jen Goodlin, executive director of the nonprofit Rebuild Paradise, said the pandemic slowed momentum that had begun to build in 2020, driving up costs and slowing everything from construction to volunteerism. Yet, there are plenty of people still in Paradise — “we’re still a town,” she said.

“I Googled ‘Paradise’ and the first thing it asks is — does Paradise still exist?” Goodlin said. “We need to change that narrative.”

A half-mile south on Skyway, the setting sun streamed through the windows at Nic’s deli and wine bar as trivia night got underway. Scattered among the tables were Camp Fire survivors, whose own escapes and family close calls still prompt tears.



Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

Nicki Jones, 79, is seen at her restaurant, Nic’s, in Paradise on Oct. 26. Jones opened the business after the Camp Fire, and while she is struggling to make money given the town’s diminished population, she is determined to continue.

But even more were newcomers. A couple moved up from Chico, where they said housing was becoming unaffordable, about two years ago, then their parents and in-laws followed. At

another table, two women moved to Paradise around the same time, one for love and the other to, at least in part, get away from Bay Area traffic.

Nicki Jones, 79, had never run a restaurant before opening Nic's in 2019. She was hoping the business, with its many loyal patrons, would be making money by now. It's not, but she's determined to continue.

"It's that old saying: Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," said Jones, who then paused, and thought a bit more. "It's a mindset. It's a resiliency. I want to help my town. I want to stay."

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