



POEMS ON FIRE

A History of Wildfires in Butte County
Poems & Stories on Living in the Wildland Urban Interface

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Poems & Stories on Living in the Wildland Urban Interface



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Dedication	1
Introduction	3
Fire History	4
Butte Lightning Complex	6
Concow Fire	8
Poe Fire	10
Oregon Fire	12
Ophir Fire	14
BTU/Lightning Complex Fire	16
Humboldt Fire	18
Craig Fire	20
Swedes Fire	22
Lumpkin Fire	24
Saddle Fire	26
Wall Fire	28
Ponderosa Fire	30
Cherokee Fire	32
Cascade/La Porte Fire	34
Camp Fire	36
North Complex Fire	38
Dixie Fire	40
Thompson Fire	42
Park Fire	44
Additional Collected Poems	46
Biographies	51
About Us	54
Forged by Fire	55

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was created by the brave people who live and work in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

A special thank you to those who have contributed time and energy to this booklet's development, including Lorielie Angle, Jacob Birdseye, Syd Blythe, Jim Broshears, Tony Campa, Paula Daneluck, Russ Fowler, David Hawks, Erik Lopez, Peggy Moak, Miram Morrill, Kieran O'Leary, Brenda Rightmyer, Chuck Rough, Carson West, Wolfy Rougle, and Dan Wormhout. Many of the poems in this booklet were written by Calli-Jane West over several years as she worked in the WUI to support wildfire safety, land stewardship and recovery. Her initials are noted next to the poems as C.J.W.



We want to acknowledge the lives of the 107 people who have perished in Butte County wildfires.

Our hearts grieve for their families and friends.

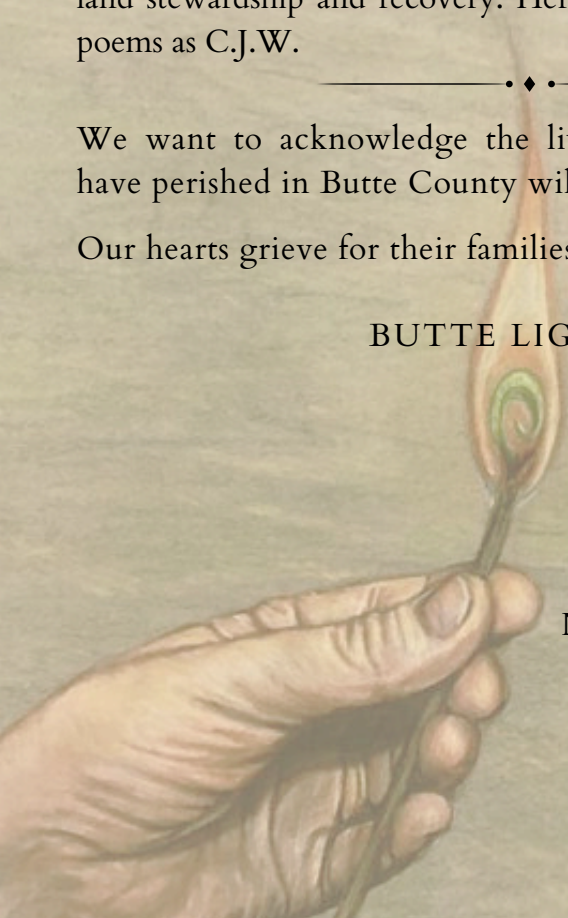
BUTTE LIGHTNING COMPLEX- 1

CONCOW - 1

LAPORTE - 4

NORTH COMPLEX - 16

CAMP - 85



DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to **Darrel Wilson**
Community Volunteer for over 25 years
and Board Chair for more than 18 years
and to the kind and mighty **Barbara Coffman**

INTRODUCTION

We hope that this booklet helps continue the legacy of land stewardship in Butte County and provides a background to future professionals and landowners engaged in fuels reduction, watershed restoration, and forest health.

Living safely with wildfire is a task that takes a wide array of partnerships and dedication from landowners in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

The amount of catastrophic wildfire since 1999 and their impacts to our communities has been unprecedented. As of the development of this booklet, over 60% of the forested areas of Butte County have burned. Although not all areas which burned were high severity, most were, and the overall ecological change to our forests has been incredibly devastating.

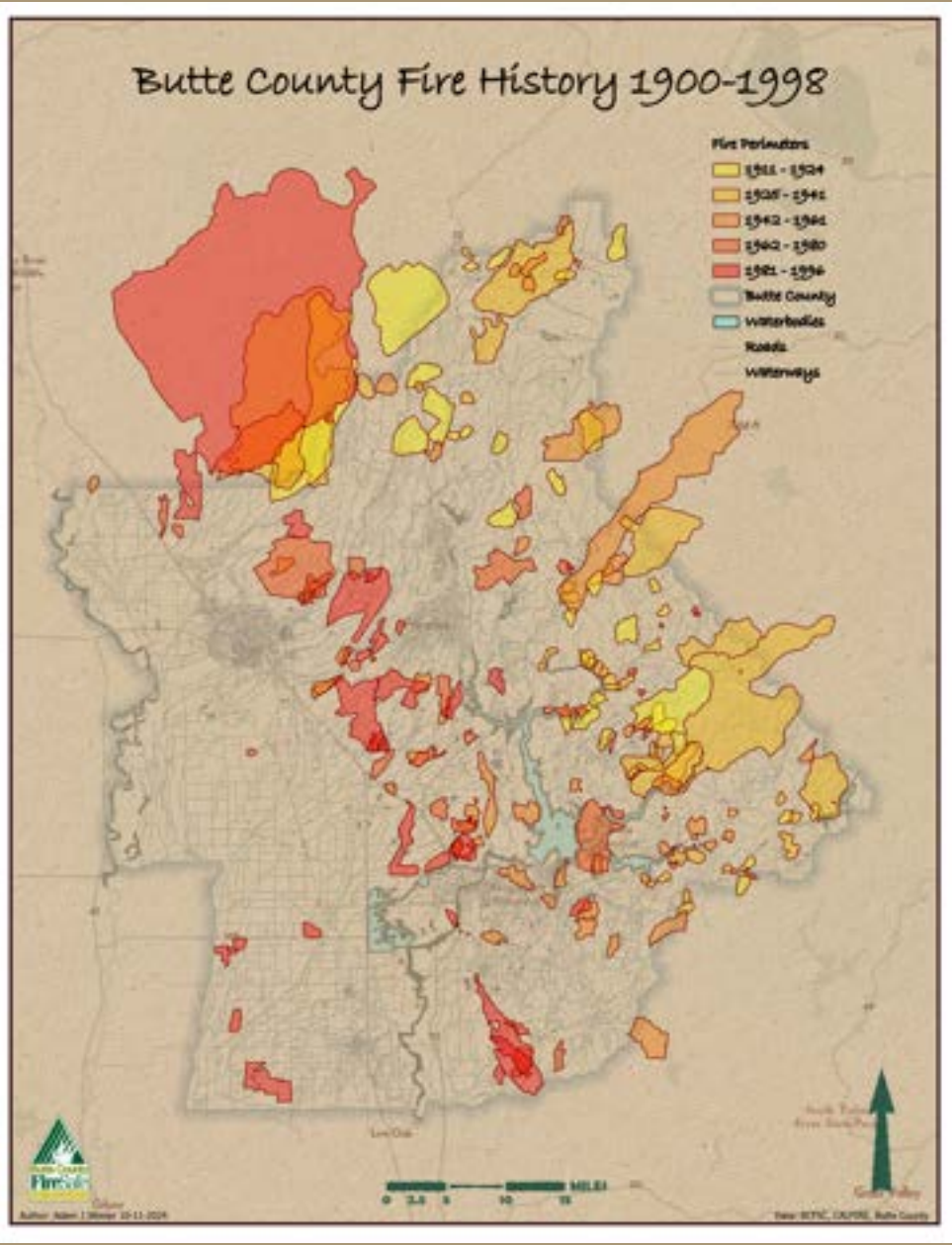
Each wildfire we experienced has brought tragedy as well as opportunities to strengthen community relationships. We are grateful to our firefighters and first responders who helped protect our communities and forests.

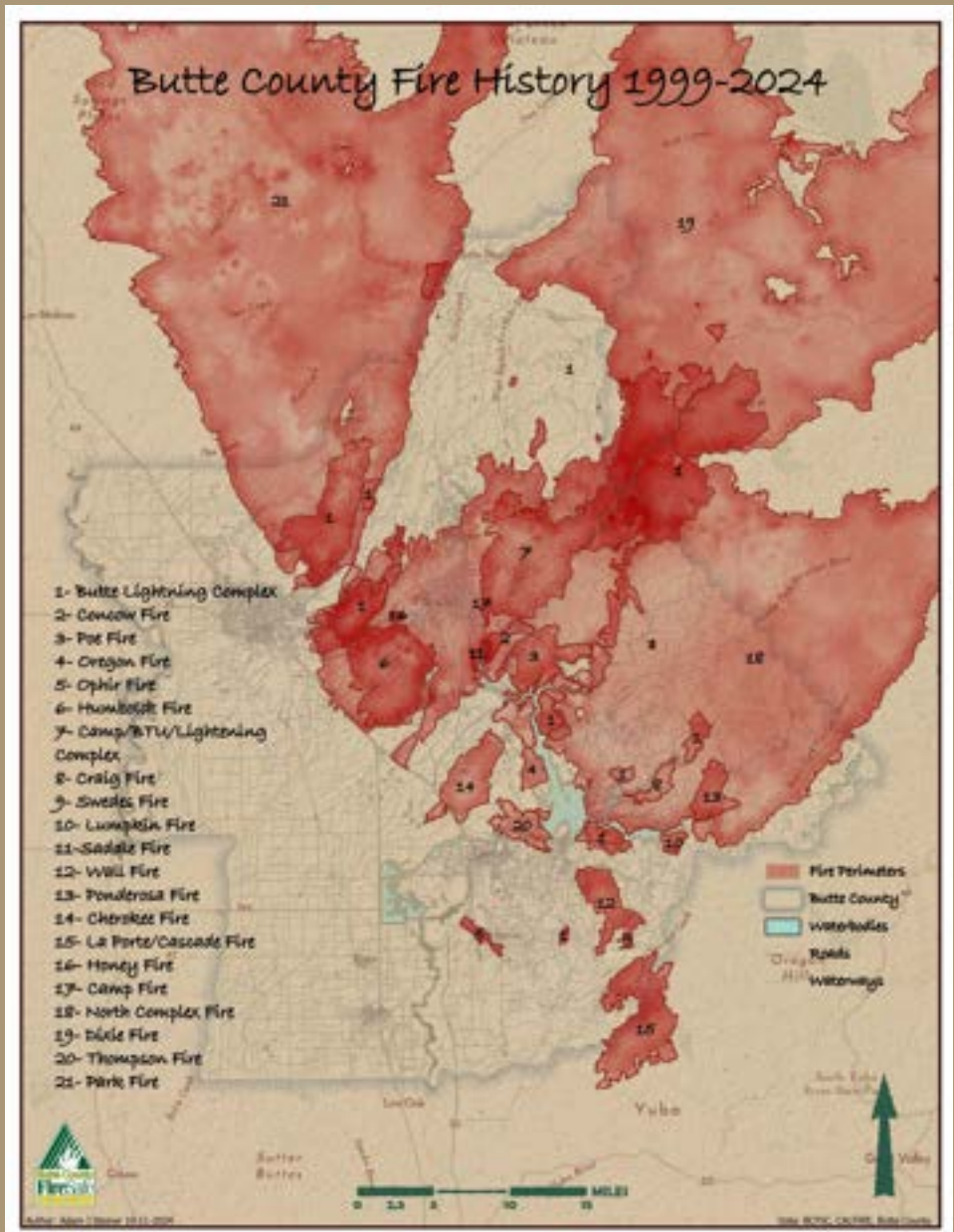
We look forward to a future where cultural and prescribed fire are implemented at a scale that reduces devastation in Butte County.

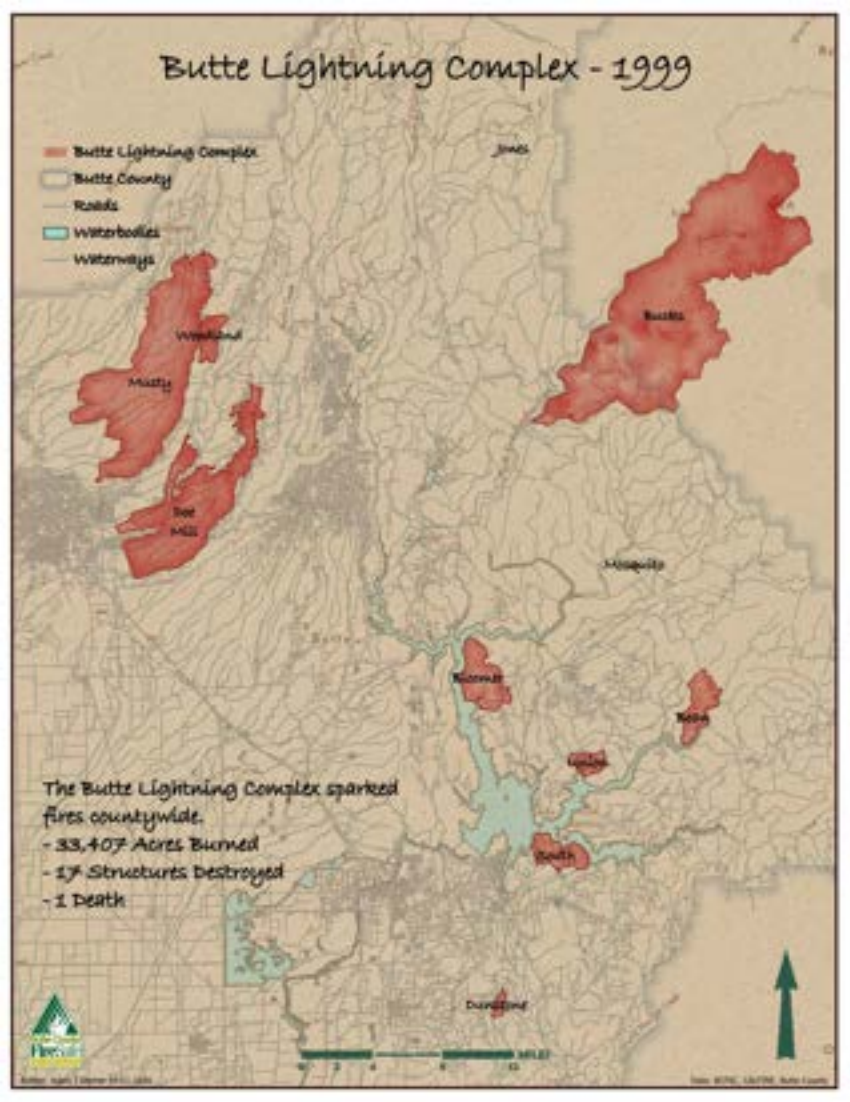
We hope this booklet helps you feel closeness with the many fire scars we live in and drive through. We also hope that you feel inspired to invest in the many community efforts that have and will continue to make differences in our overall safety and protection of forests in Butte County.

FIRE HISTORY

Major Wildfires of Butte County 1999-2024					
Date	Fire Name	Community	Butte Co. Acres	Total Acres	Structures Destroyed
1999-07-01	Lightning Complex	Multiple	33,407	33,407	17
2000-09-19	Concow	Concow	1,835	1,835	16
2001-09-06	Poe	Concow/Yankee Hill	8,333	8,333	133
2004-08-11	Oregon	Cherokee	2,030	2,030	4
2008-06-10	Ophir	Ophir/Palermo	1,600	1,600	49
2008-06-11	Humboldt	Paradise/Butte Valley	23,344	23,344	87
2008-06-21	Camp/Lightning	Concow	57,616	57,616	119
2008-08-03	Craig	Feather Falls	2,001	2,001	2
2015-07-29	Swedes	East Oroville	400	400	16
2015-09-11	Lumpkin	Feather Falls/Forbestown	1,040	1,040	0
2016-09-05	Saddle	Paradise/Pentz Rd	800	800	3
2017-07-07	Wall	East Oroville	6,033	6,033	98
2017-08-29	Ponderosa	Feather Falls	4,016	4,016	55
2017-10-08	Cherokee	Cherokee	8,417	8,417	3
2017-10-09	La Porte	Bangor	6,151	6,151	74
2018-11-08	Camp Fire	Butte	153,336	153,336	18804
2020-08-17	North Complex	Berry Creek/Feather Falls	155,595	318,935	2455
2021-07-13	Dixie	Butte, Plumas, Shasta, Lassen, Tehama	24,470	963,309	1311
2024-07-02	Thompson	Oroville	3,789	3,789	26
2024-07-24	Park	Butte, Plumas, Shasta, Tehama	52,937	429,259	428
Total			547,150	2,025,651	23,700







On July 1, 1999, a dry lightning storm hit Northern California, igniting the Butte Lightning Complex. The fires lasted approximately two months, with major fires like the Musty and Doe Mill fires transforming forested areas into brush fields and leading to the establishment of local fire safe councils.

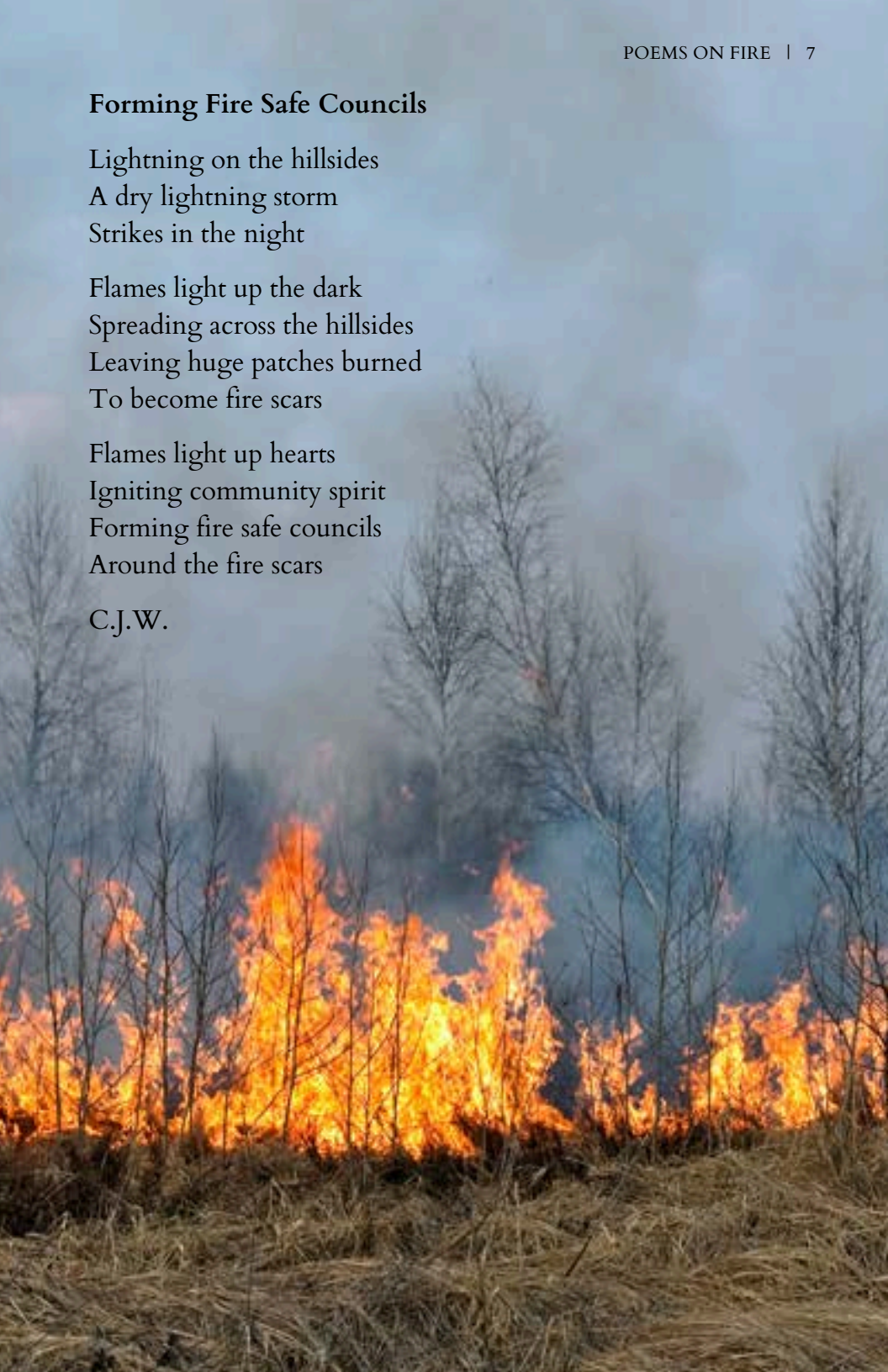
Forming Fire Safe Councils

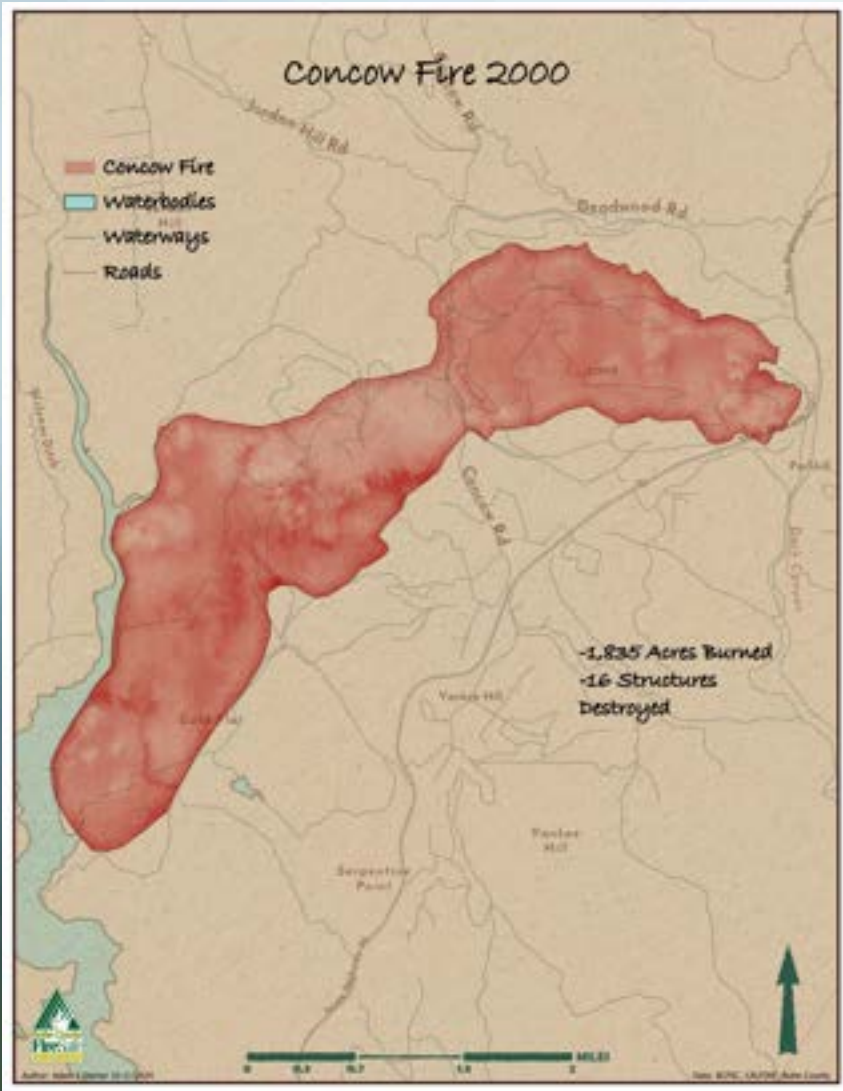
Lightning on the hillsides
A dry lightning storm
Strikes in the night

Flames light up the dark
Spreading across the hillsides
Leaving huge patches burned
To become fire scars

Flames light up hearts
Igniting community spirit
Forming fire safe councils
Around the fire scars

C.J.W.





The Concow Fire, which occurred from September 19-20, 2000, was human-caused. Tragically, one resident lost her life while trying to save her pets, and a firefighter was injured during the rescue effort.

Learning to Live with Wildfire

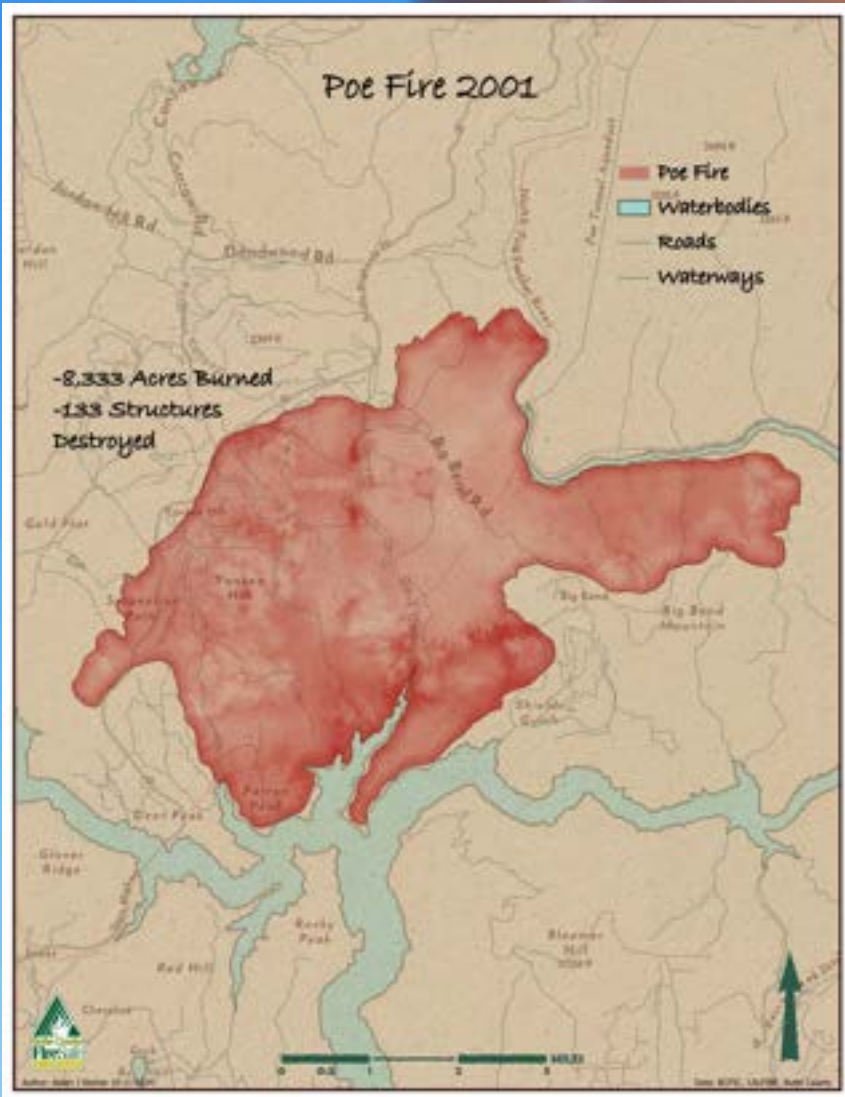
Concow pool
A community place
just a small drop of water
Centered in the fire's footprint

Thick forest grew tall
behind the pool
The fire burned the trees
Leaving a steep, scabby hillside
A grim backdrop
to the cool pool oasis

Concow School survived the fire
Across the street from the pool

Students go back and forth
Learning to swim
Learning to live with wildfire

C.J.W.



The Poe Fire ignited on September 6, 2001, when a tree fell on a power line. Driven by strong winds in Yankee Hill, it burned for six days. Without a disaster declaration, residents faced resource shortages, prompting the Yankee Hill Fire Safe Council and local volunteers to lead recovery efforts.

Fire! Fire! Fire!

Roaring up from Poe in the canyon below
 Our family, friends and neighbors in its path
 Phones and power are out, no way to get reports
 We fear for the Moak Ranch in Yankee Hill,
 frustration builds

Pete can't get to the ranch—the roads are blocked!
 Then the fire rages,
 making a fast run from Big Bend through Yankee Hill
 The roadblock opens - wow!
 From Concow Pete and I rush to the ranch

Fire on all sides of us for miles.
 Night falls and the fire is so close
 A couple of hundred feet away
 They need well water to spray on and around the house

Yikes! John can't get his new generator going,
 Dang, dang, dang!

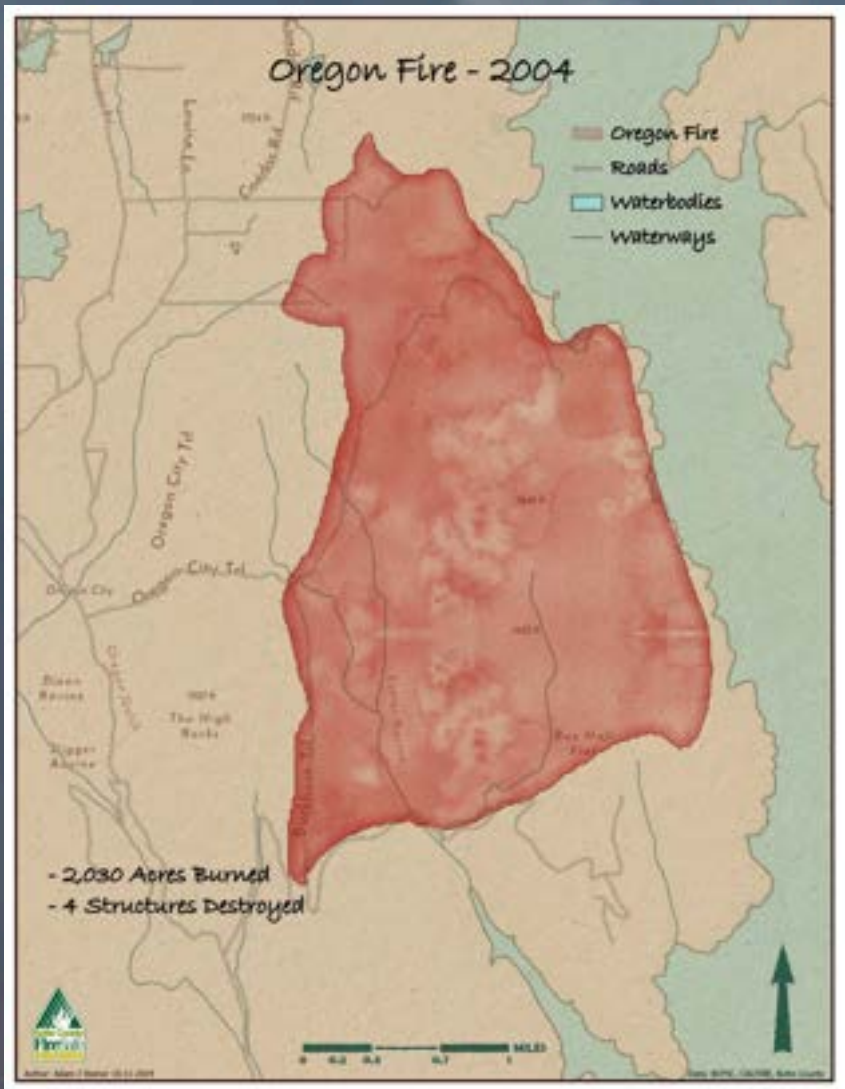
But wait! Our generator in Concow is working
 - let's go get it!

It's midnight as we get the generator up on the truck bed.
 Happy Birthday, Pete - you'll not forget this 50th!

Luck is with us and we get back to the Moak Ranch
 without being stopped
 6 am and we are sitting in lawn chairs by the fire trucks
 Overhead, a helicopter arrives
 and showers the surging blaze with water.

We get a thorough dousing as well!
 We're laughing now, and hugging each other -
 we feel safe, and relieved.
 That was just the beginning of our "trials by fire".

Peggy Moak



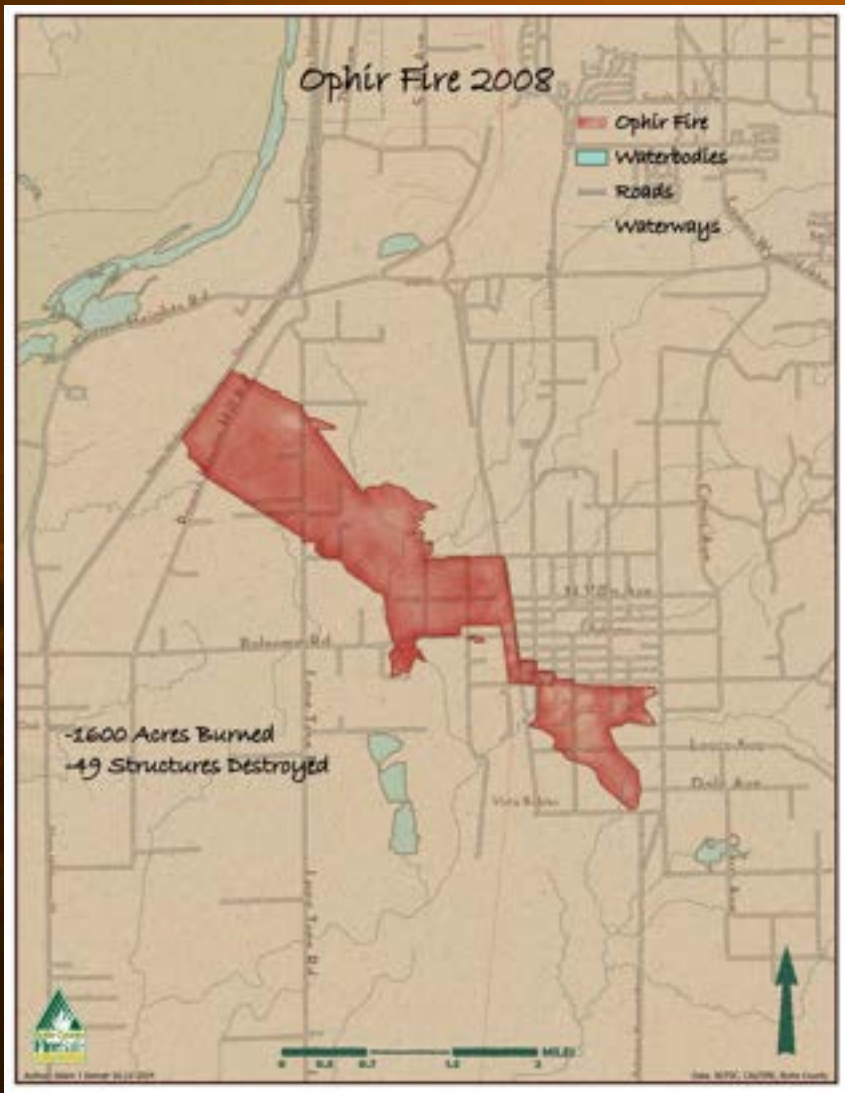
The Oregon Fire started on August 11, 2004, near Lake Oroville, and lasted two days. Fueled by dense vegetation and extreme weather conditions, the fire spread rapidly, presenting significant challenges for firefighters. According to CAL FIRE, the fire was caused by a vehicle.

Trees I Have Never Seen

A blazing hot day with a smoke-filled sky
Ashes fall here at my feet
From trees I have never seen
Fire is destruction to people's dreams
Two times the tears rose up

C.J.W.





The Ophir Fire ignited on June 10, 2008, due to an electrical failure of a billboard under dry conditions. It was the first major fire of the summer, quickly spreading from Highway 70 and threatening farms and homes. The following day, on June 11, the Humboldt Fire began.

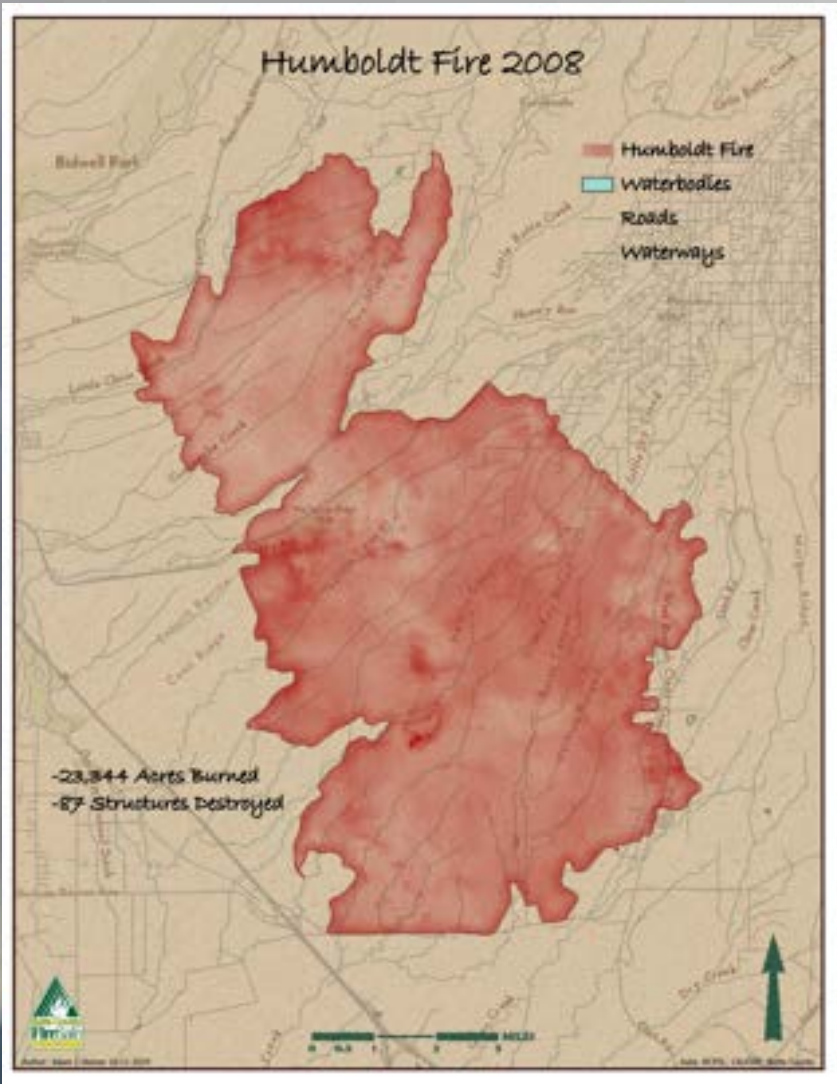
Flames of June

The beginning of a tragic fire season
Sparks grew to flames
From an unlikely billboard
Along the highway

The fire moved fast through the grass
In warm June air
Blown by northwest winds

Consuming homes in its path
Families will start to rebuild

C.J.W.



The Humboldt Fire started on June 11, 2008, and lasted three days. It began during a red flag warning, quickly spreading through lower Butte Creek Canyon. The fire prompted the first major evacuation of Paradise, based on a 1998 plan, which was successful but revealed the need for better evacuation and traffic control measures, such as implementing “One-Way Traffic” on Pentz Rd.

Wind and Fire

Flames moved down canyon walls
Like a wild animal
Moving in on civilization
Creating havoc in our delicate systems;
Roads, plans, commitments,
resources, lives
Safe at a distance
Safe to be in awe
Of the thick smoke

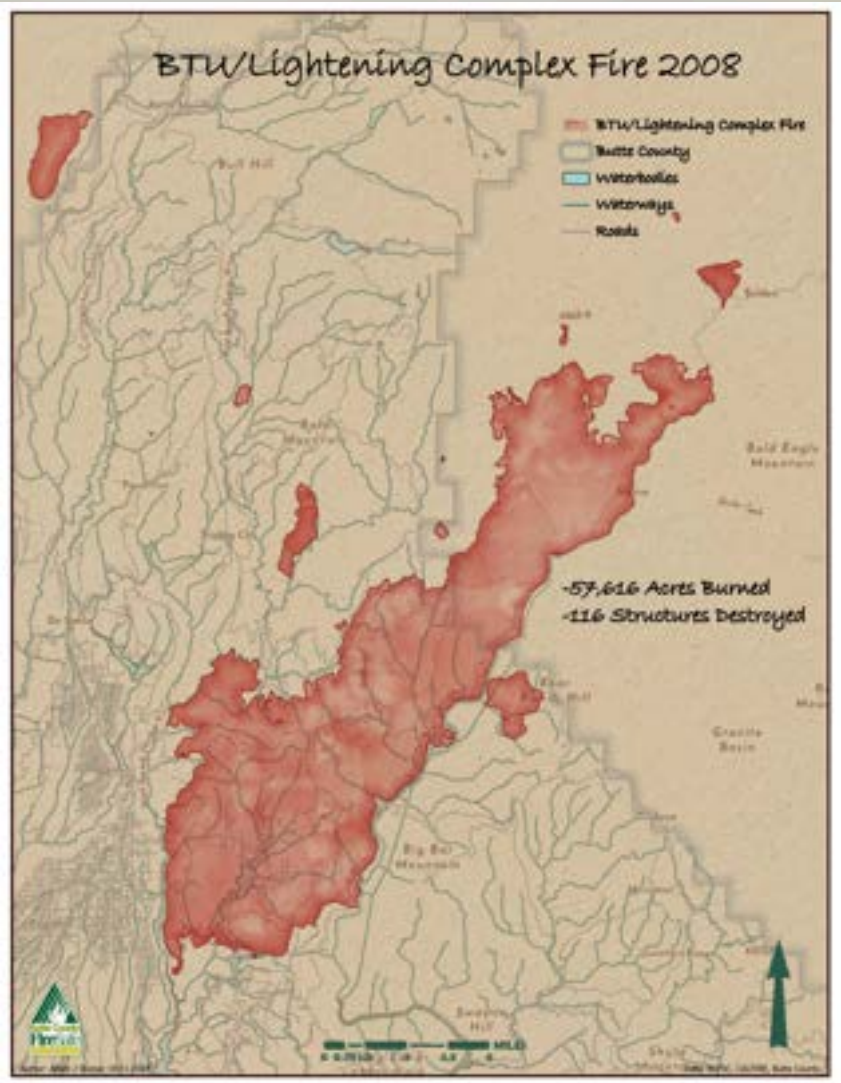
Chugging, Chugging, Chugging

Lifting what was on the ground
up to the sky

Safe at a distance
Maybe not for long

C.J.W.





On June 21, 2008, a dry lightning storm sparked the Butte Lightning Complex in Northern California, igniting multiple fires. The fires burned for over 30 days, requiring several CAL FIRE teams for containment. After residents returned to Concow from evacuation, strong winds reignited the fires, resulting in one fatality.

Smoke Spirits

The smoke carries with it
 Spirits of ancient times
 Spirits of plants and animals
 Spirits of the places we call home

So thick and so dense
 Smoke fades the distance into a blur
 There's no fan big enough to blow it away

Smoke fills our vision and is in every breath
 Little babies and elders
 Cats and dogs in evacuation shelters
 Birds and lizards
 Even wasps and moths

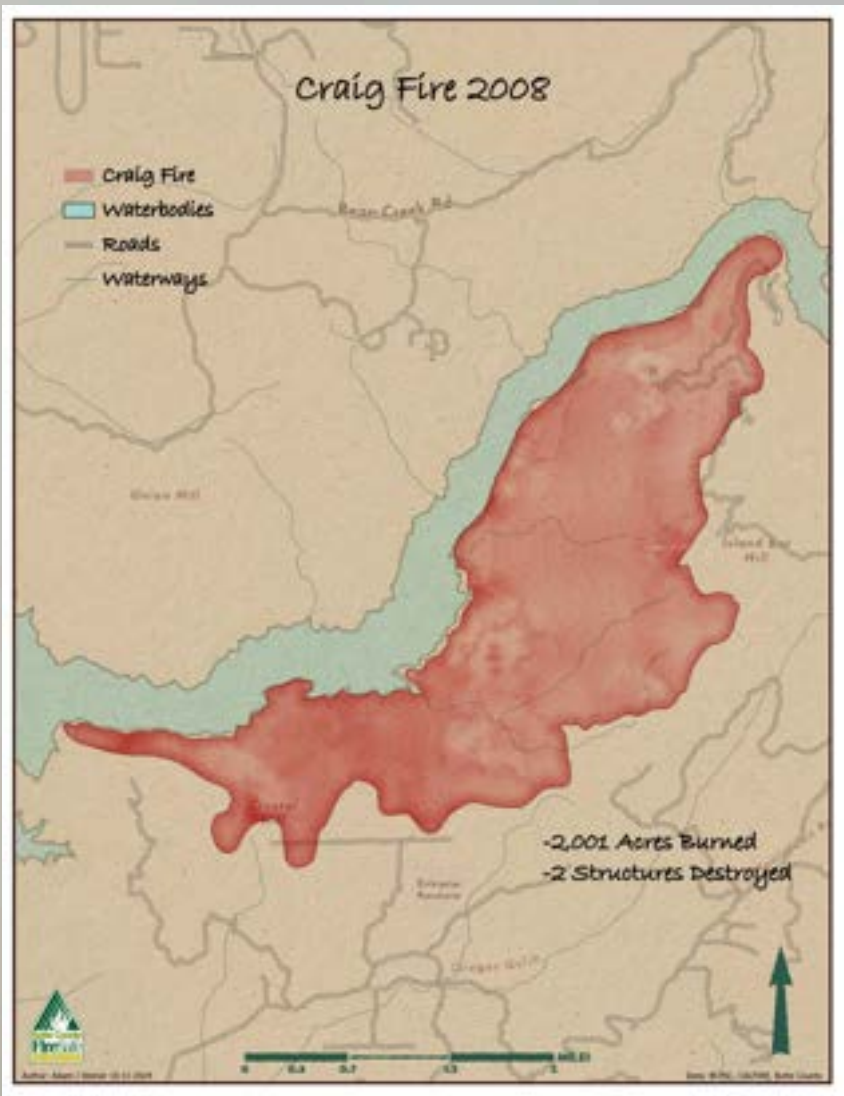
C.J.W.



Sad Calm

The wind has peeled layers of smoke from the wildfire
 The sky shyly recovers its joyous blue
 But a sad calm has settled on us
 Now our mulberries taste like ash
 And the blue oak leaves are orange.
 Our land's turned black and fragile.
 The last flames are being fought,
 The end of the fire's rage is marked by a sad calm.

C.J.W.



The Craig Fire in Feather Falls near Lake Oroville started on August 3, 2008, due to a bird hitting a power line. The fire lasted for nine days.

Gears Shifting

One plane in the sky
Flying to fight the flames
From a distance it seems calm
But the sky is streaked and dirty from the smoke

There is a fire burning
in the middle fork of the Feather River
We can imagine the fire engines with gears shifting
Up and down the mountains
bringing fighters to the blaze
Fight the flames

We know the people are in a frenzy,
The day came that they hoped would never come,
Seeing smoke,

Packing their cars
Not knowing enough
When would they come home?

C.J.W.





The Swedes Fire started on July 29, 2015, and took almost a week to fully contain.

Land of Wildfire

Swedes Flat was once a town
Where the hills are dry and wooly
Covered with scrub brush

Boom towns like it
Have come and gone
Fire was their constant menace

Flames destroyed nearby settlements;
Bidwell Bar 1854
Thompson Flat 1856
Oroville 1857

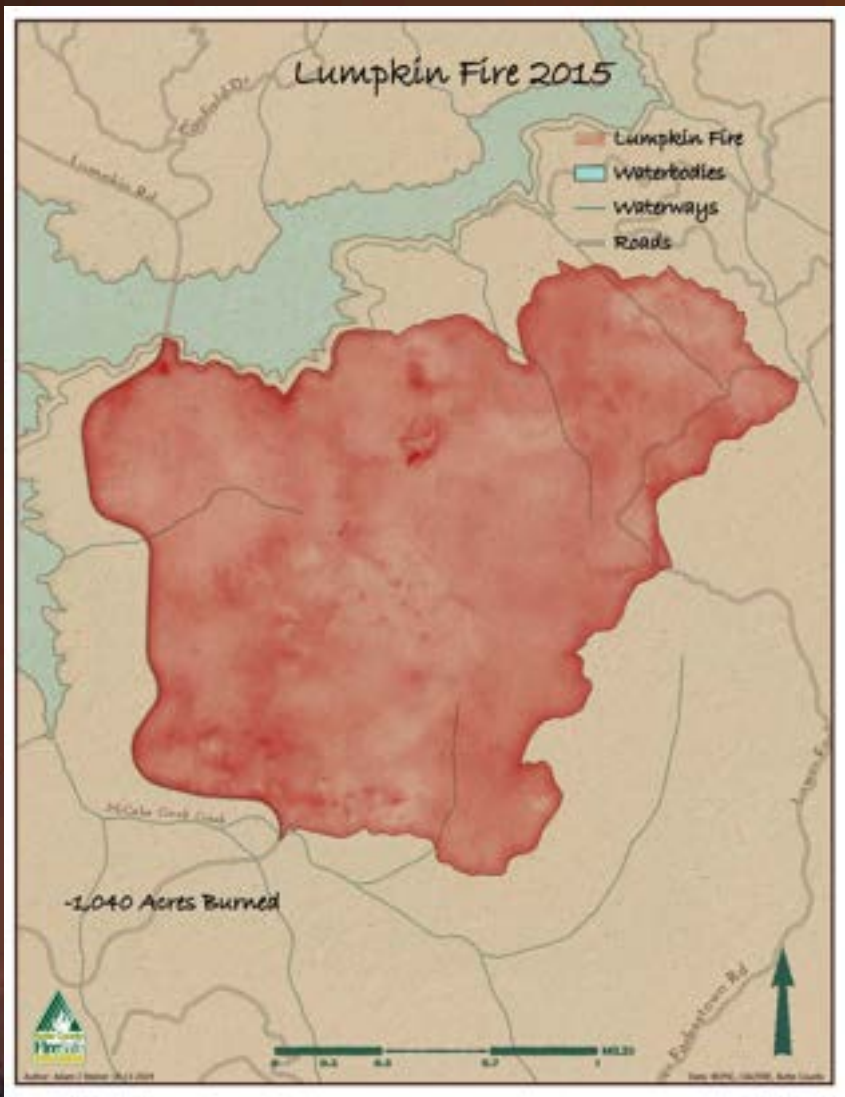
Sheep once roamed the hillsides
Nibbling the vegetation
But they have wandered on

Now overgrown
The shrubs spread under hot pine trees
Spot fires can easily establish

Air attack during the day
Fire crews at night

Swedes Flat
A land of wildfire

C.J.W.



The Lumpkin Fire near Forbestown started on September 11, 2015, and burned for five days. It was caused by an individual unlawfully setting fire to forestland. The US Forest Service's 2011 Slapjack project, which focused on fuels reduction, played a key role in slowing the fire's rate of spread.

Steep Country

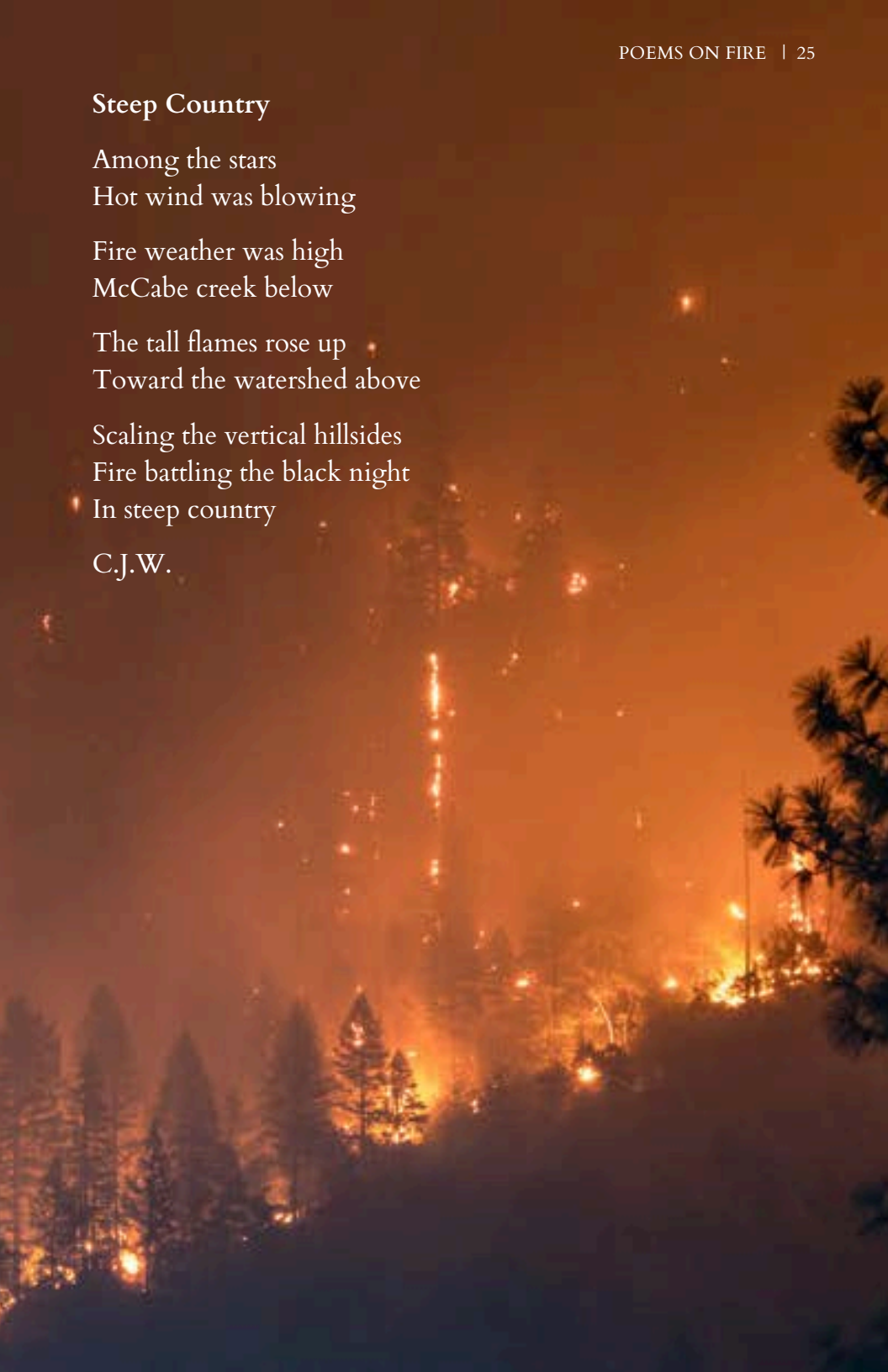
Among the stars
Hot wind was blowing

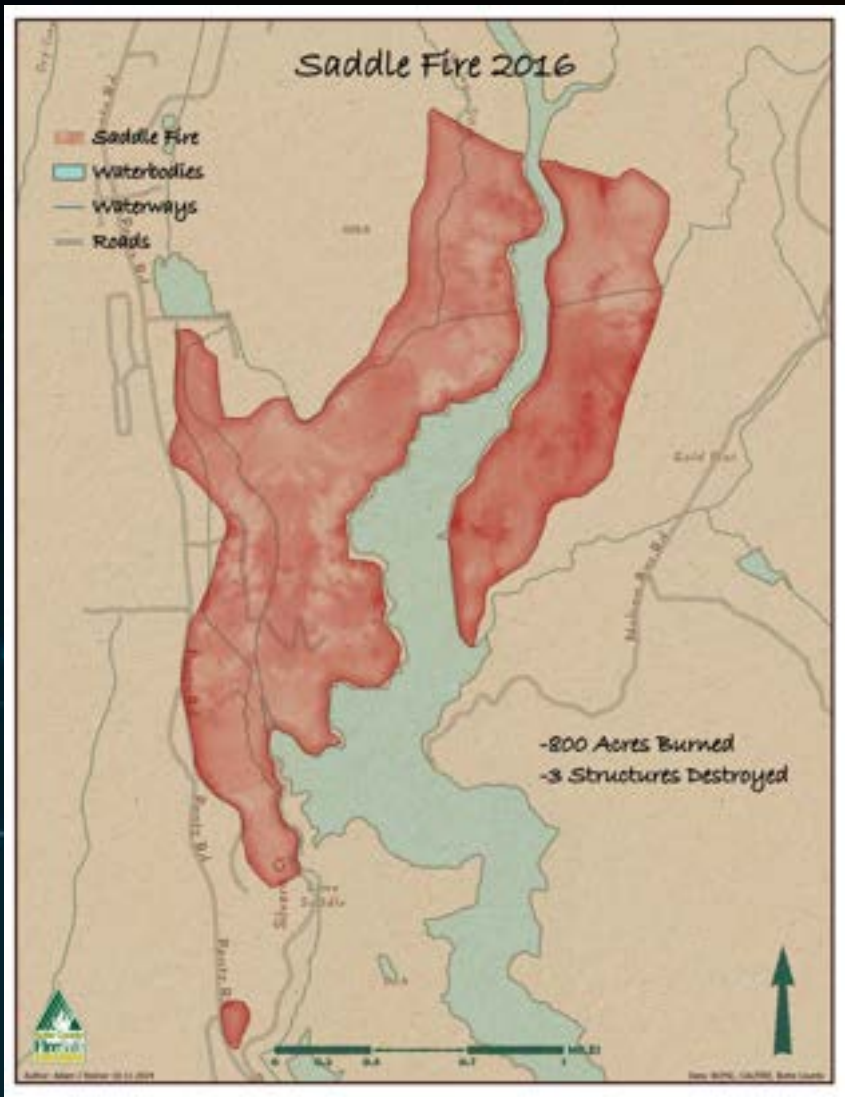
Fire weather was high
McCabe creek below

The tall flames rose up
Toward the watershed above

Scaling the vertical hillsides
Fire battling the black night
In steep country

C.J.W.





The Saddle Fire near Pentz Rd. in lower Paradise started on Labor Day, September 5, 2016, and burned for six days. It threatened the Town of Paradise and the community of Concow, while also disrupting local communications. The cause of the fire remains unknown.

Ashes in the Wind

The burned forest waits for renewal
Swirling dust devils move over the ground

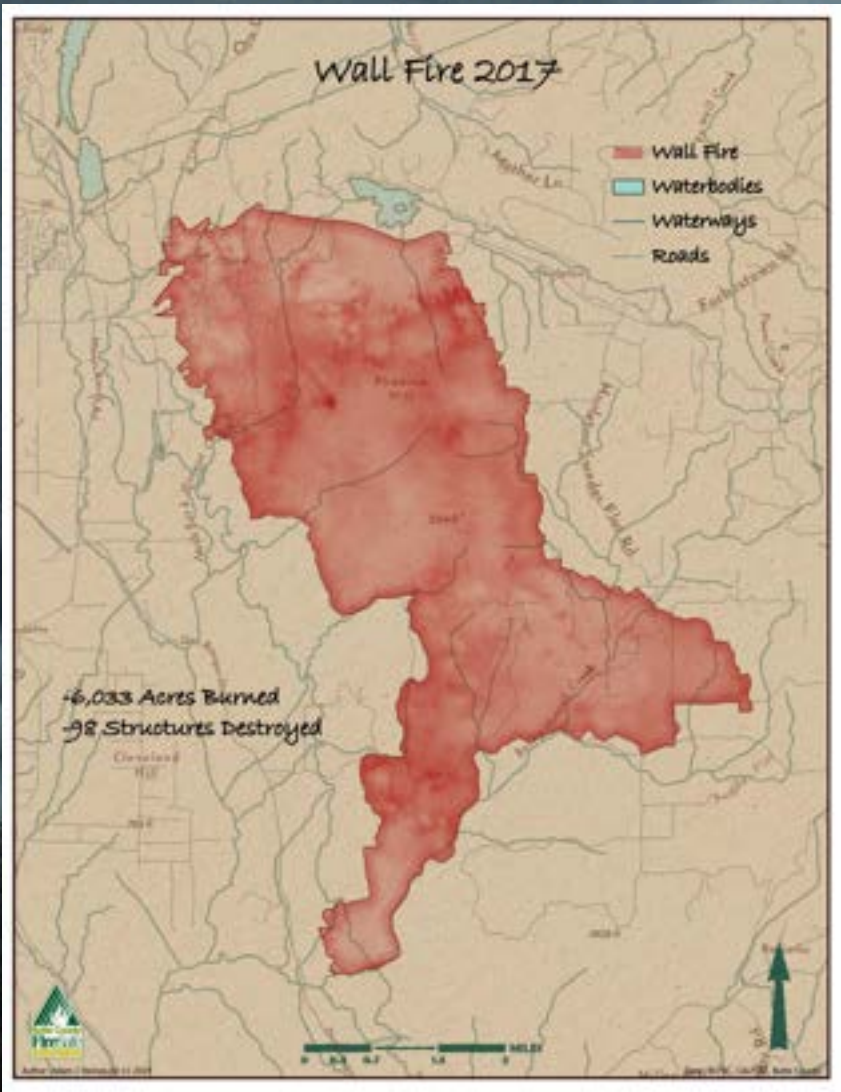
Picking up ash from the black soil
Throwing it into the air

The cool breeze of fall is chilly

Buzzards circle low in the sky
Planning their seasonal migration to new lands
Dozens and dozens

Our trees are so dry
The fire burned the flume
That brings them water
They can't migrate

C.J.W.



The Wall Fire, started on July 7, 2017, and burned for 10 days. Butte County fire investigators determined the fire was started by a defective electrical panel.

As the Crow Flies

Ash falls on our yard
The fire is 15 miles away as the crow flies,
Ash like little paper tears.

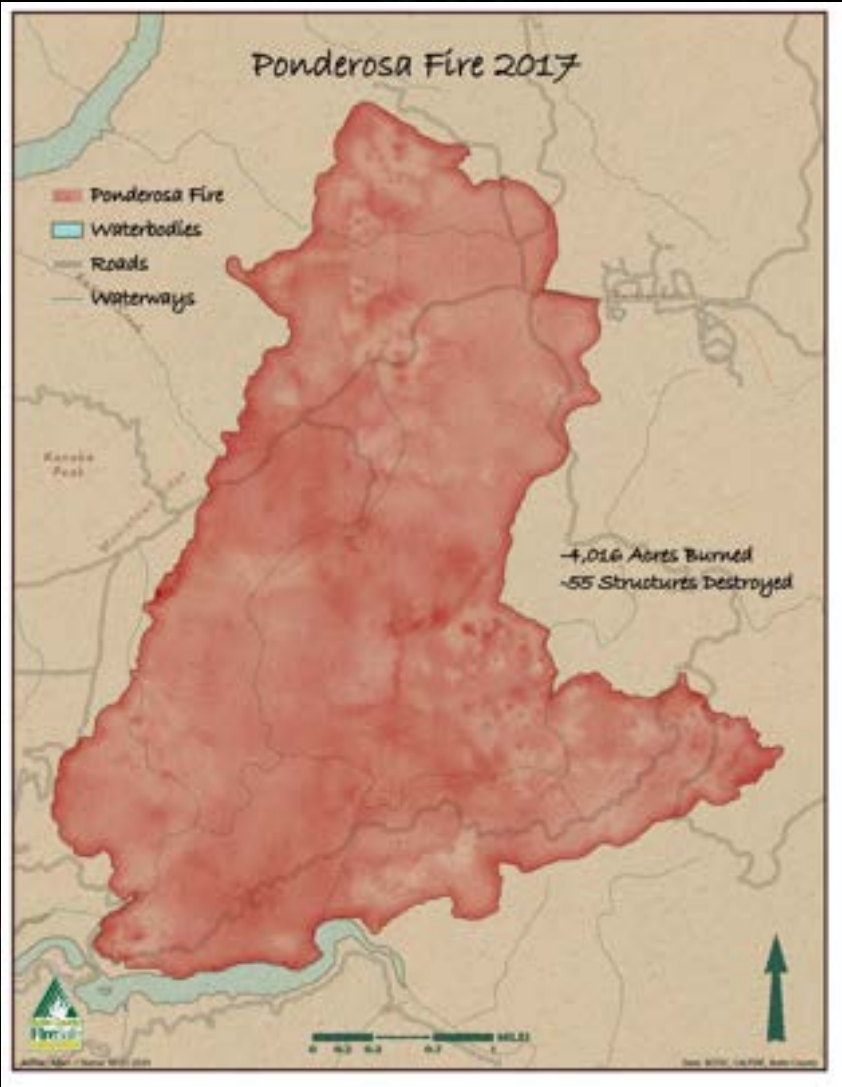
C.J.W.

Woodleaf Farm

The organic farm in the foothills
A dream we all had together
The peach trees' gentle branches
made it real
An oasis among the dry blue oaks.

Then the tornado of fire
Whirled up the ravine and across the ridge
Flames licked the back of the farm
Barns and buildings were laid flat
The peach trees remain, to recover.

C.J.W.



The Ponderosa Fire started on August 29, 2017, and burned through Feather Falls, causing significant destruction to the community and threatening Forbestown.

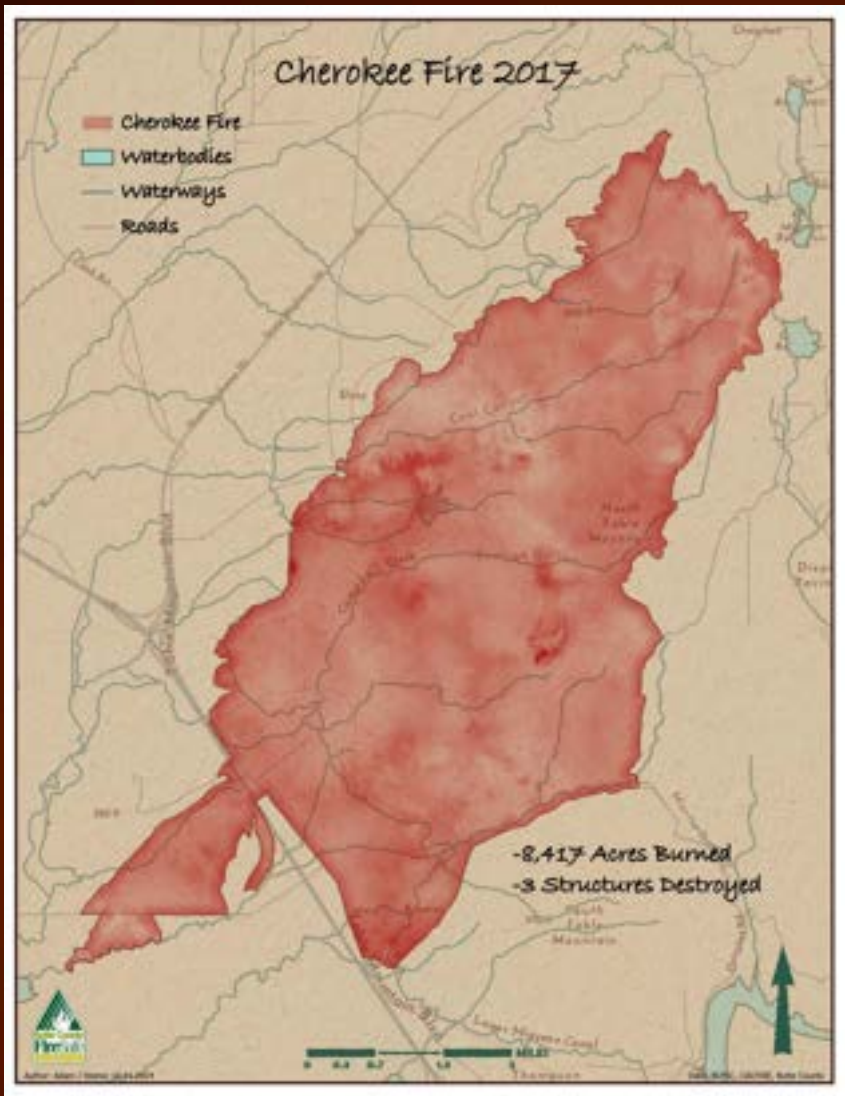
Ponderosa

Railroad spikes resting in the dust
It's quiet now in the forest
where the wildfire raged up the ridge

Flames that scored the lands
between Kanaka Peak
and the invisible logging town of Feather Falls.

From the mountain top we see a sacred rugged land
Where prayers have drifted in the wind
from the Maidu, miners, loggers, and homesteaders.

C.J.W.

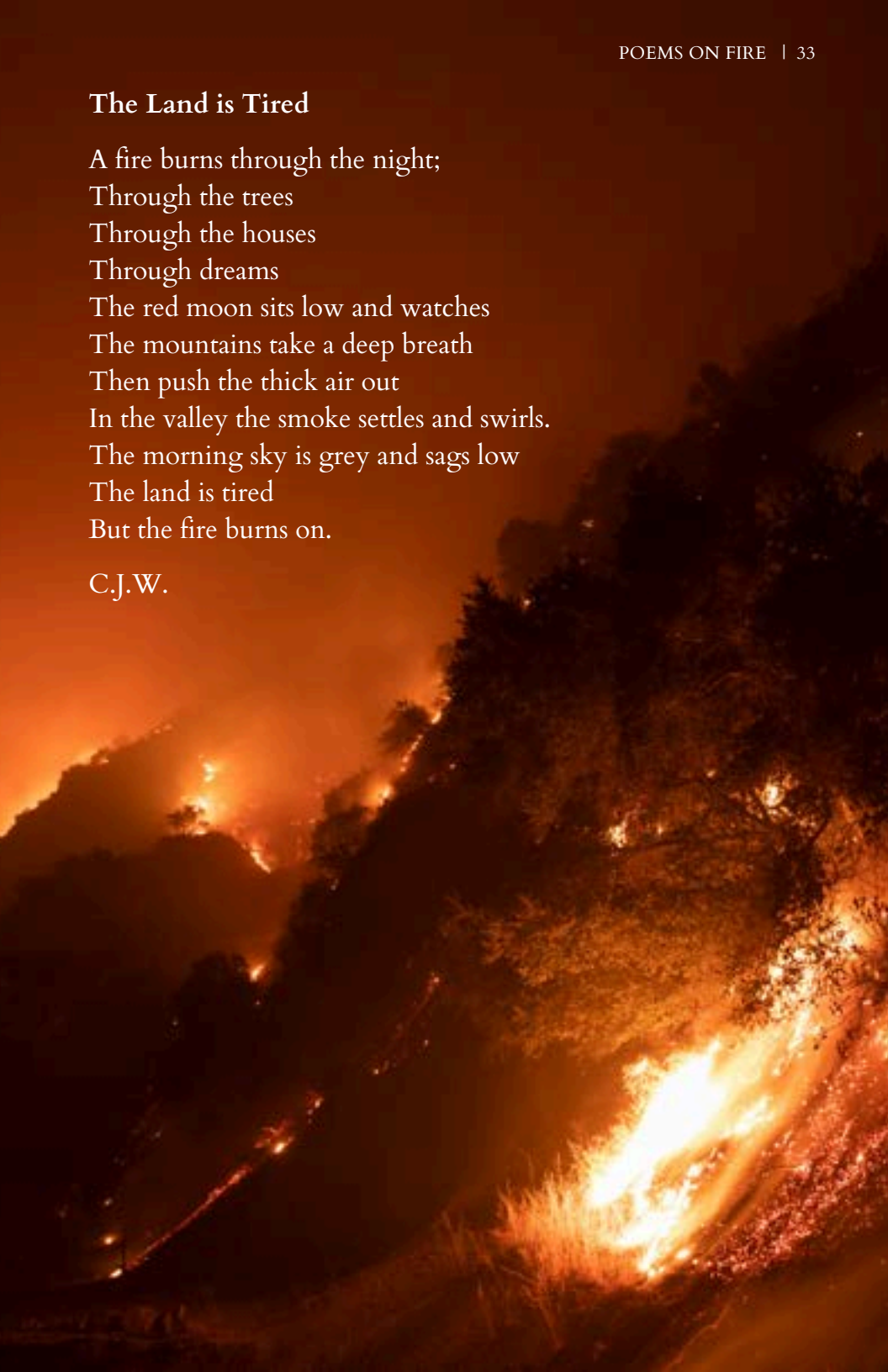


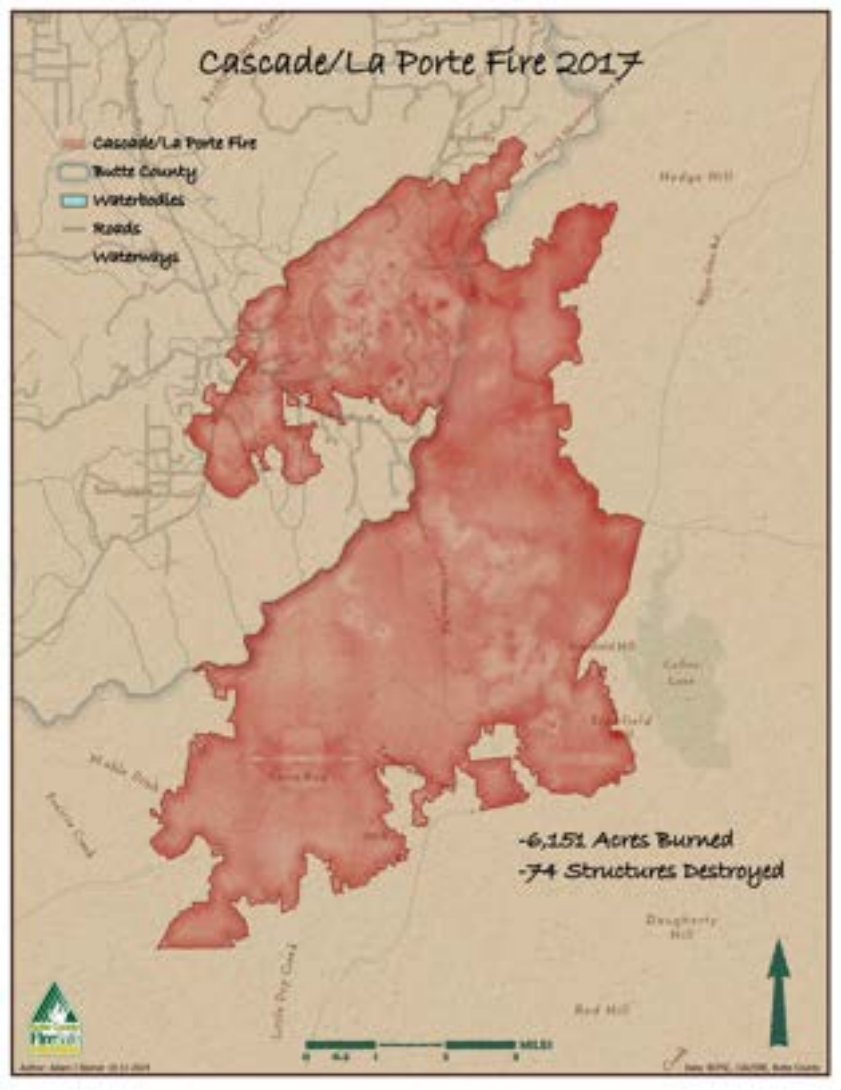
The Cherokee Fire started on October 8, 2017, and lasted 124 days. The fire was determined to have been caused by multiple Live Oak tree branches that contacted an energized powerline, which failed and ignited the surrounding vegetation.

The Land is Tired

A fire burns through the night;
Through the trees
Through the houses
Through dreams
The red moon sits low and watches
The mountains take a deep breath
Then push the thick air out
In the valley the smoke settles and swirls.
The morning sky is grey and sags low
The land is tired
But the fire burns on.

C.J.W.





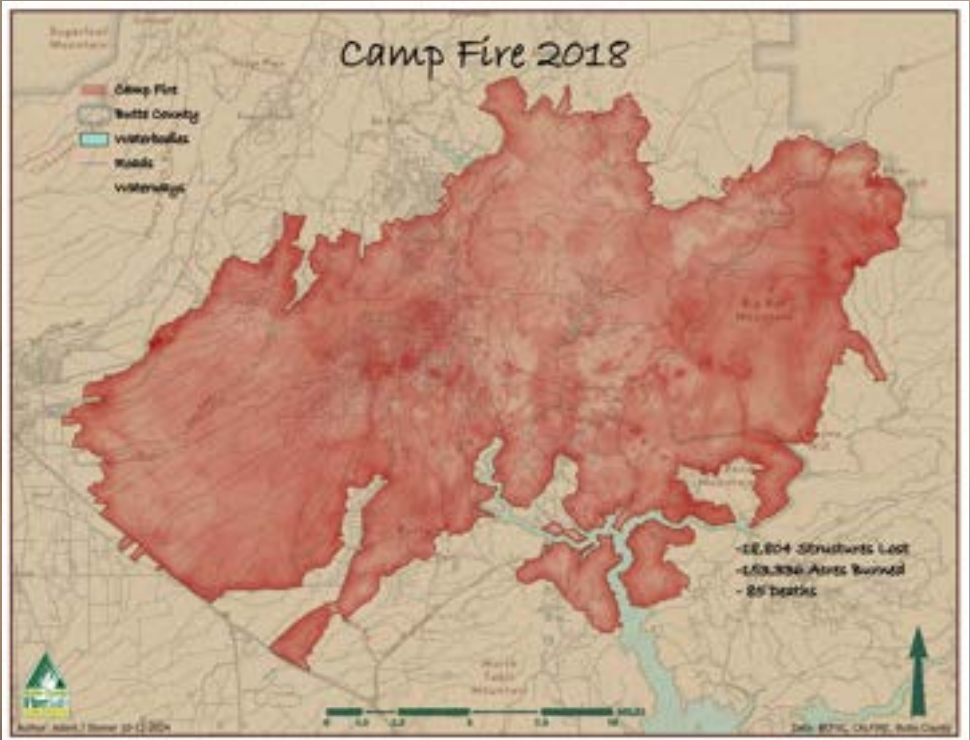
The LaPorte Fire, part of the statewide Wind Complex, began on October 9, 2017, and lasted 123 days. The investigation determined that the fire was caused by trees coming into contact with power lines.

Turning Blue

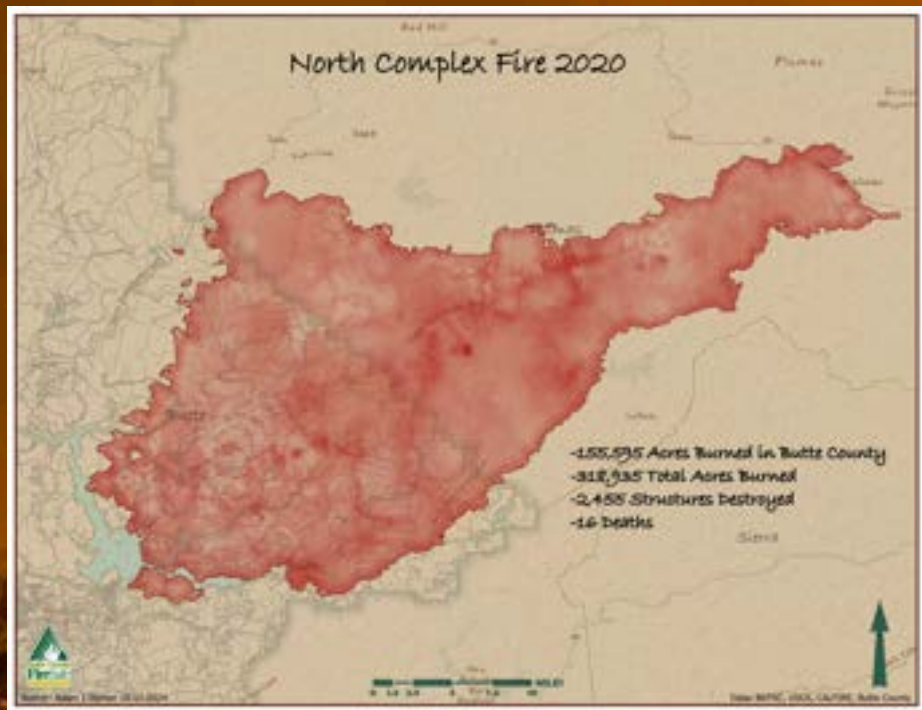
Summer is over,
And no one knows what to do,
Ashes touching my skinny shoulder,
A memory that slowly kills you,
You might think it's pneumonia,
Or a handshake of smokey fumes,
No, it's not that at all.

It's my heart,
It's turning blue.

Jacob Birdseye



The Camp Fire, ignited on November 8, 2018, lasted 18 days. It began in the flea drainage near Pulga in the Feather River Canyon. The fire impacted multiple communities and became the most destructive and deadliest wildfire in the state's history. Tragically, 85 lives were lost. Faulty PG&E electrical lines were found to be the cause, sparking public outrage and legal consequences.



The 2020 North Complex Fire began on August 17 and lasted 109 days, lightning-sparked fires burned across multiple northern counties. Despite the efforts of 1,600 firefighters, who managed evacuations of hundreds of people, the fires ravaged critical natural areas, including the Middle Fork of the Feather River.

Trees No Longer

Like thousands of others
in the past few years,
Jamie lost her home
All the things she owned
The place she loved

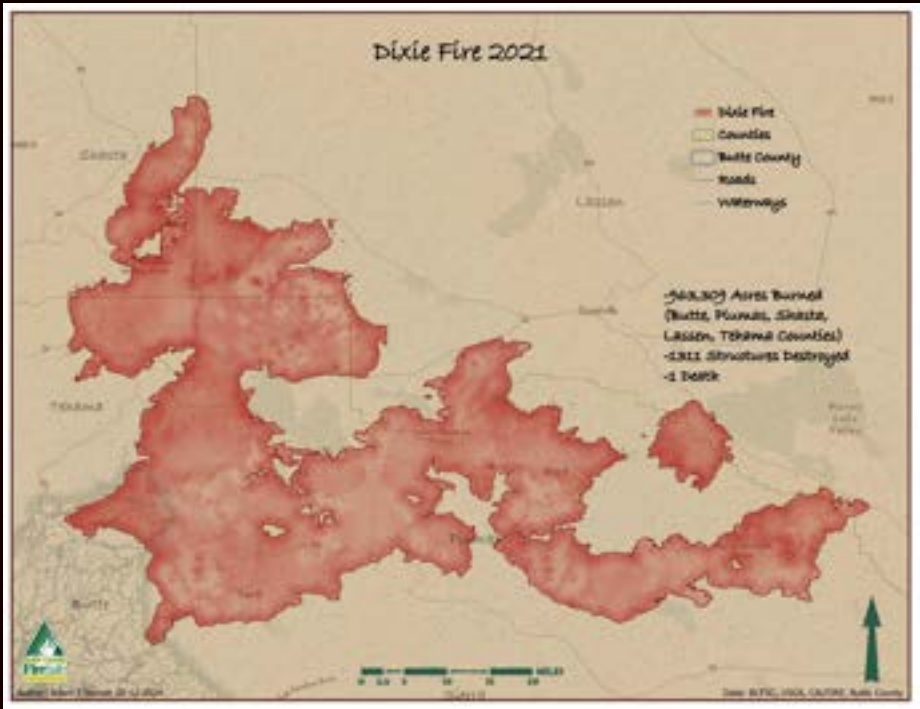
After she evacuated
Her yard was a refuge for
A deer, dog and chickens
They all perished

When she returned
The holes were dug for their burial

She's most sad about the trees that died
Not one tree survived on her 10 acres
They are now a danger
To be felled one by one.

C.J.W.





The Dixie Fire began in the Feather River canyon on July 13, and lasted over three months. The fire burned in multiple counties, including Butte, Plumas, Lassen, Tehama, and Shasta.



Up in the Forest

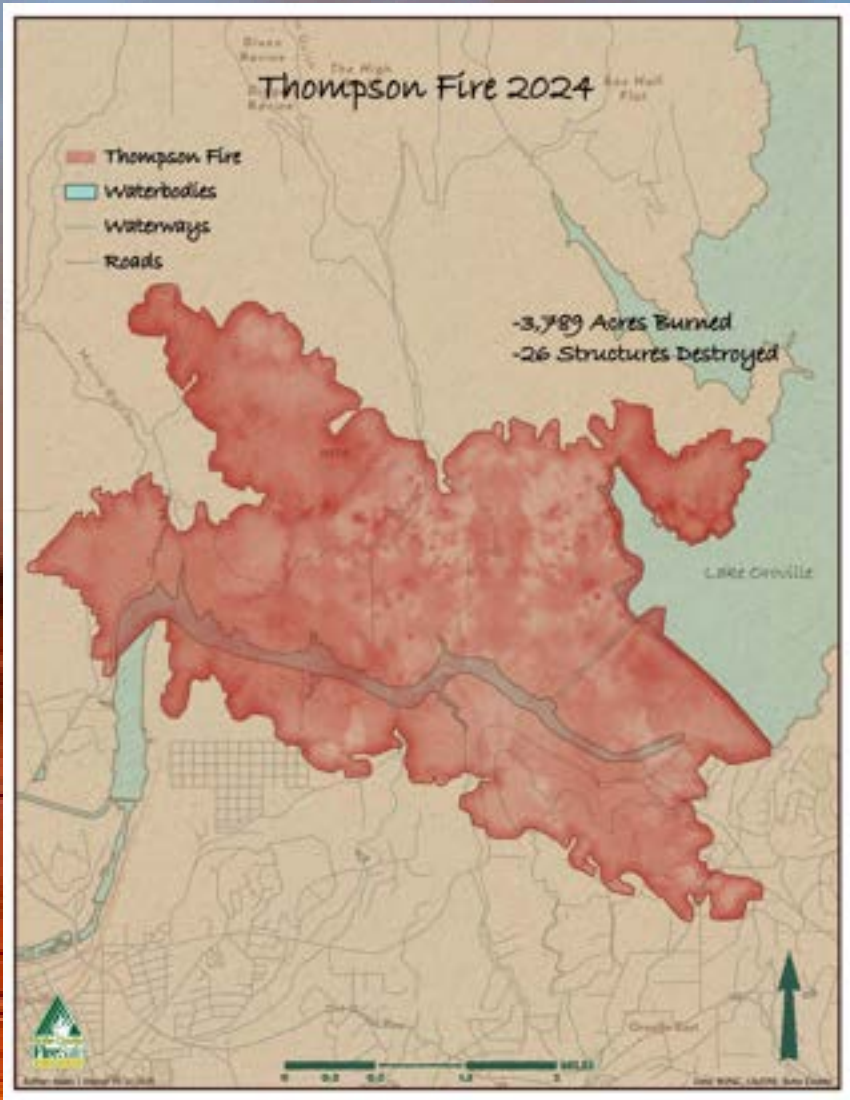
The forest stretched across the mountainsides
A backcountry patchwork quilt
A summer haven
Complete with lakes, trails and thick trees

Shadows held hands
with mosquitoes in open meadows
Old fruit trees gathered sunshine

The happy harmony was disrupted
As the blaze climbed out of the canyon
Spreading for weeks
The green now turned black
Devastation for miles

C.J.W.





The Thompson Fire started on July 2, and lasted through the 8th of 2024. The fire began from a firework near Thompson Flat and impacted many Lake Oroville recreation facilities.

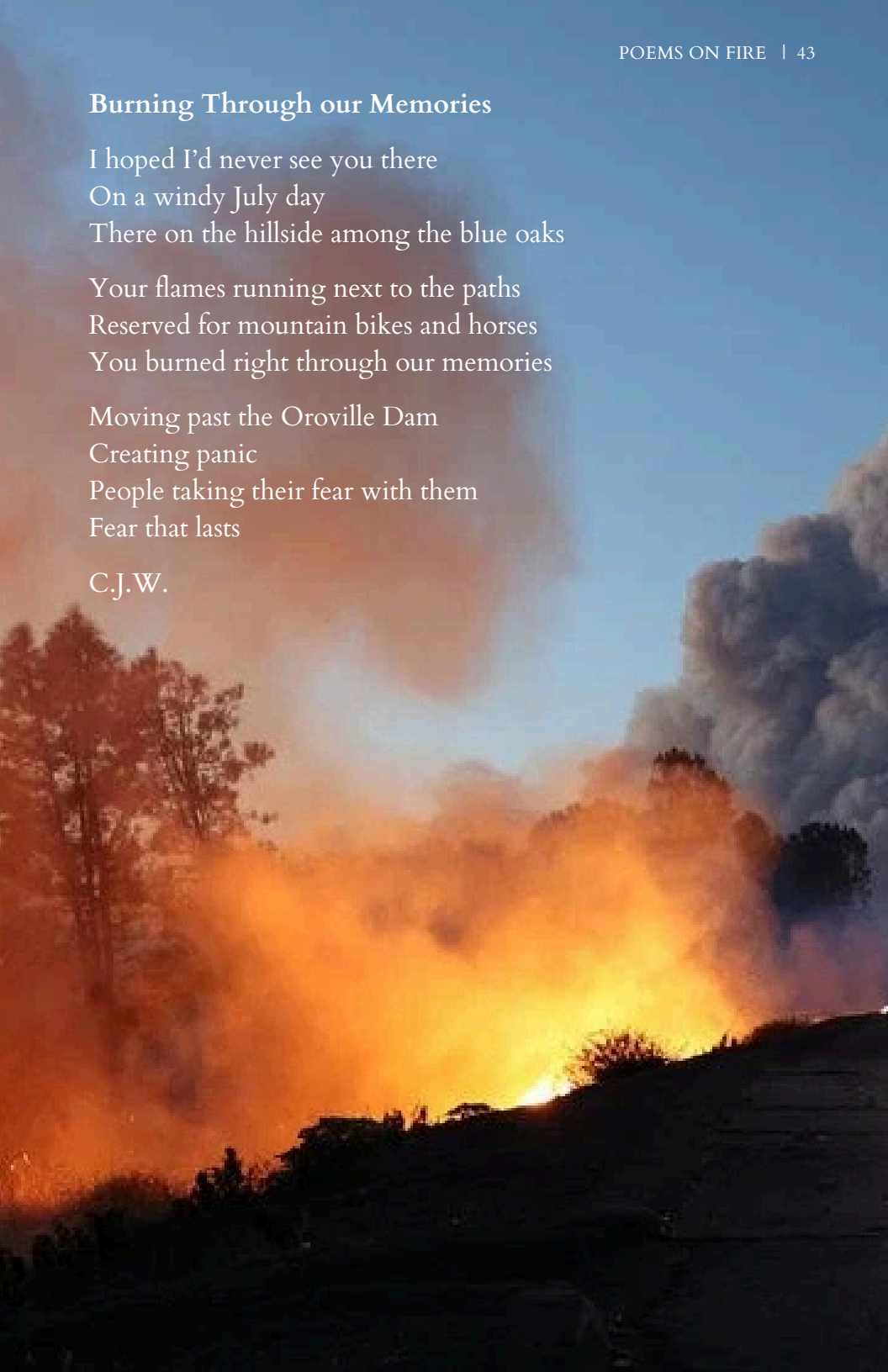
Burning Through our Memories

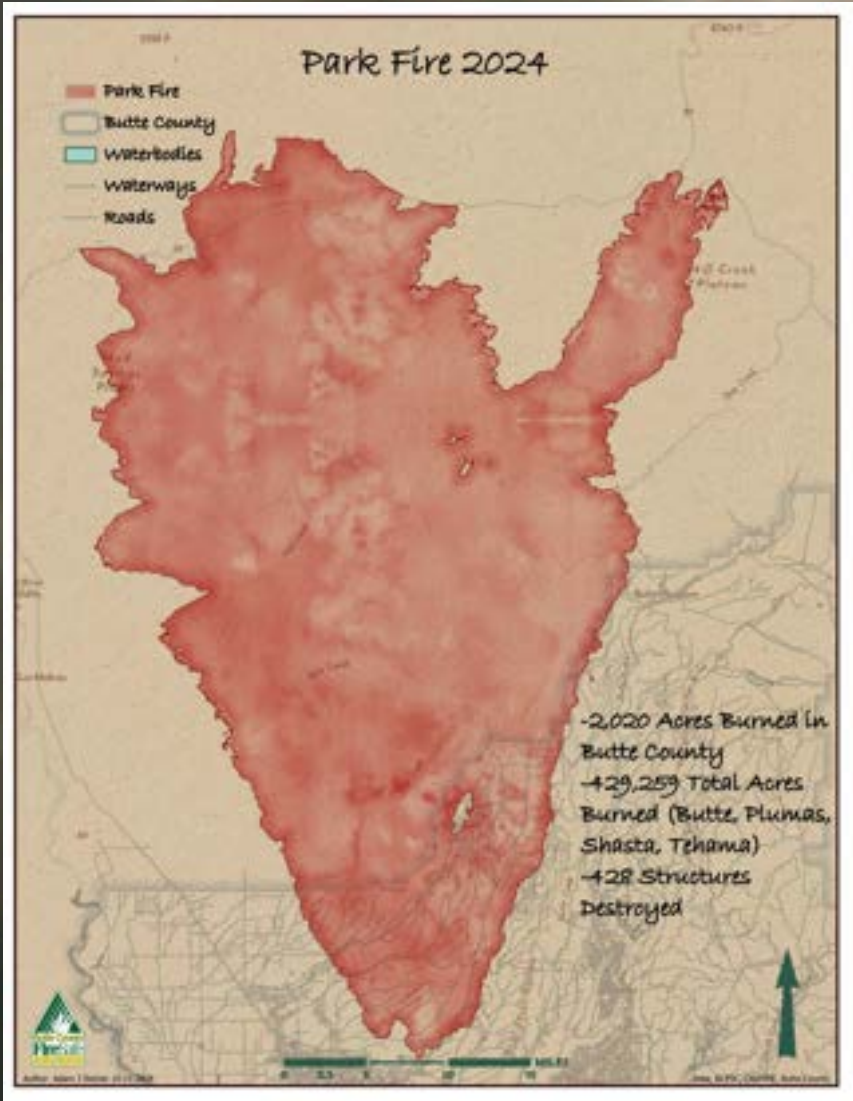
I hoped I'd never see you there
On a windy July day
There on the hillside among the blue oaks

Your flames running next to the paths
Reserved for mountain bikes and horses
You burned right through our memories


Moving past the Oroville Dam
Creating panic
People taking their fear with them
Fear that lasts

C.J.W.





The Park Fire started on July 24, 2024, and continued until September 26. Caused by arson, the fire spread rapidly, burning 4,000 to 5,000 acres per hour on the first day. A major success in wildfire preparedness was demonstrated in Cohasset, where a 717-acre "green island" remained unburned thanks to collaborative partner projects. Notably, there were no fatalities during this wildfire.



Gingerbread Man

A fire on the hillside
Travelling through grass and brush
First walking then running through the park

Into the wildland
Like the gingerbread man
Who taunts his maker, “can’t catch me”

Late into the night we see the red glow in the sky
Consuming dry places,

C.J.W.

EMBERS AND ECHOES

ADDITIONAL COLLECTED POEMS

Pile Burning

Burning
It's time for burning brush piles
Up and down the mountain range
Brush burning hot
Leaving no smoke signals

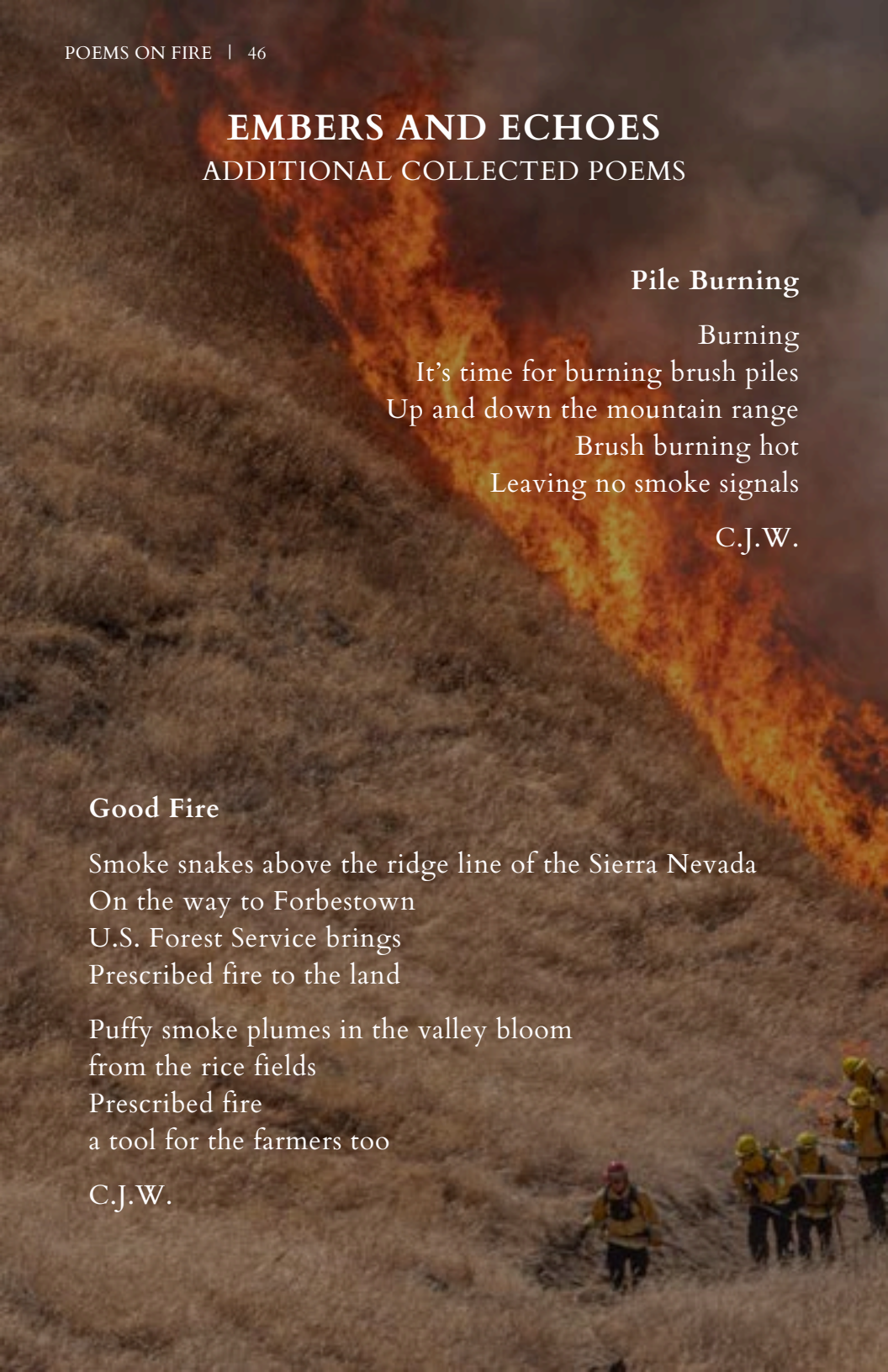
C.J.W.

Good Fire

Smoke snakes above the ridge line of the Sierra Nevada
On the way to Forbestown
U.S. Forest Service brings
Prescribed fire to the land

Puffy smoke plumes in the valley bloom
from the rice fields
Prescribed fire
a tool for the farmers too

C.J.W.



Out of Here

"There must be some way out of here"

-Jimi Hendrix

Smoke, again, back home
Stars twinkle over the pass
I sit this one out

On our way to Idaho
Brother's dozer cutting line

While I've seen the sky
Rain ash many times before
I'll sit this one out.

Rebekah Casey

I grew up in Concow with the sky raining ash from time to time. "Is it time to leave?" I'd ask. "Not yet," my father would console me. This haiku is about the time I could not sit astride another fire.

This time, I left my children for Yankee Hill to coax my parents out on the evacuation warning. They have already lost two homes, leaving with fire raging at their heels. My father, strong, brave and keen, didn't want to evacuate. He tried to console me.

Brothers, cousins, uncle on the fire line running dozers, excavators, low-boys, water trucks. I couldn't sit with myself, with them on the edge of fire. This time, I headed with the kids to Idaho for deep breaths under blue skies.

Fire Recovery - Wall and Ponderosa

The sign on the side of the road said, "Is Your Home Ready"?

It had sat there all summer by the Wagon Wheel Market
Over 60 homes have burned in 2 fires: Wall & Ponderosa

At the wildfire recovery meeting near Kelly Ridge

A man shared how his home was saved,
the newspaper reported it.

A woman shared her home was lost;
the TV had reported it too.

So many in the room are grieving loss.

C.J.W.

Alert Sounds

Alert sounds

Around the room phones go off

Tensions rise, looks are shared

How bad will it be?

The waiting begins

Do you go or do you stay?

Winds shift

Clouds form

Everyone mobilizes, some with practiced ease

Watching, waiting

Will it be enough

Disaster, Recovery

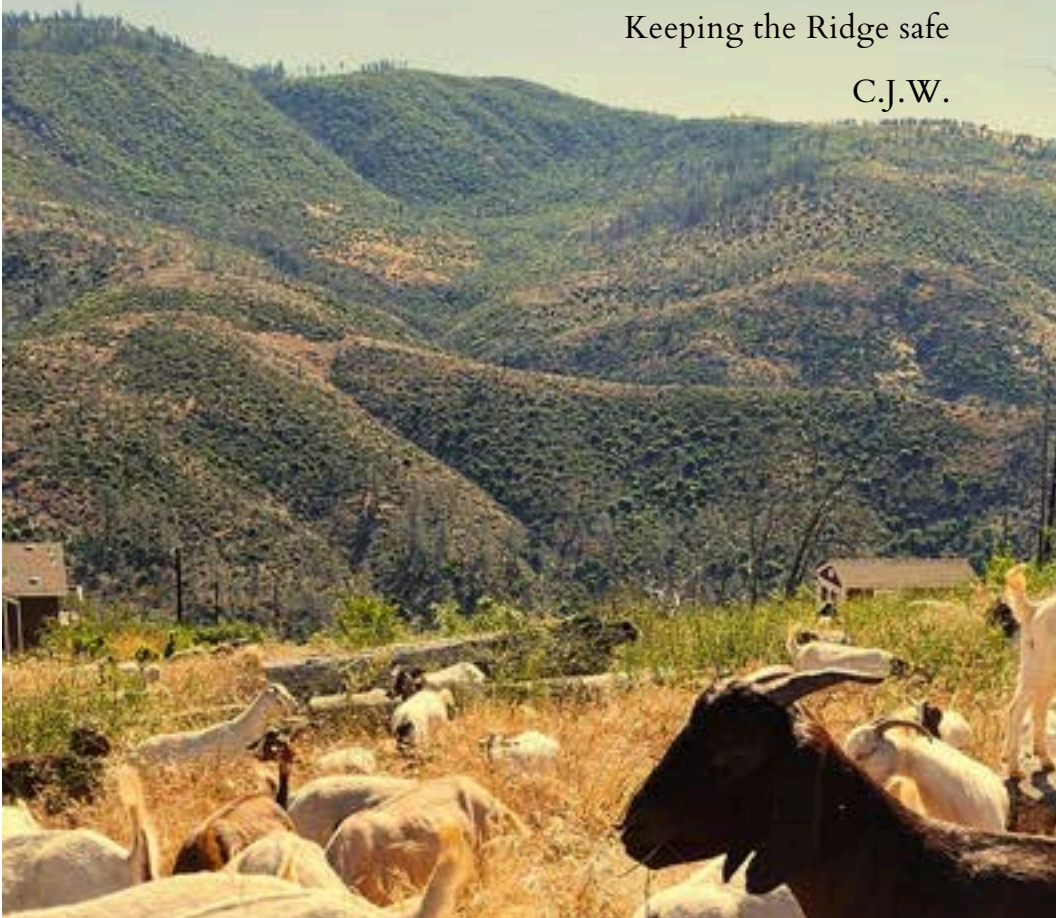
Resilient, Strong.

Paula Daneluck

Billie the Goat – A Paradise Legend
Crafted for the Paradise Revival Festival 2022
For Jeff Gould

Just a week old, the baby goat sets out on his purpose
his small hooves travel lightly across the red soil
He follows a trail through the young brush
The path he travels was black
and covered in soot after wildfire
The sound of munching leaves is loud
as he totters to his siblings
A herd dog watches closely
to ensure he rejoins his mother safely
As the season changes and years pass on
He will continue his work
Keeping the Ridge safe

C.J.W.





Melion Merrill @Pyrosketchology

BIOGRAPHIES



Calli-Jane West, Executive Advisor of the Butte County Fire Safe Council, previously served as Executive Director for 18 years. In her new role, she supports the organization's mission by advising the current leadership and staff. Poetry allows her to express the emotions tied to her many wildfire experiences. She holds a Master's in Geography from CSU Chico and loves family adventures in Butte County's oak woodlands and conifer forests.



Miriam Morrill, a consultant in fire communication, education, and nature journaling, retired in 2020 as a State Fire Prevention Specialist in California. With 27 years of experience in roles like Forestry Technician and Wildlife Biologist, she has supported national and international fire efforts, including training in Jamaica and wildfire planning in Micronesia. Since 2020, she has led fire journaling workshops and created the Pyrosketchology program to improve fire education and community adaptation. Learn more at pyrosketchology.com.

BIOGRAPHIES



Rebekah Casey, raised in the Concow basin between the North Fork and West Branch of the Feather River, always dreamed of a career close to rivers. Today, she fulfills that dream by leading large-scale restoration projects and working in collaborative environments that foster diverse ideas. She raises two children in Butte County, surrounded by a supportive community of family and friends.



Paula Daneluk, a public administrator and urban planner with over 30 years of experience, is the Director of Butte County Development Services. She has led major projects like fire recovery efforts, the Upper Ridge community plan, and a notable General Plan update. A skilled project manager, she founded an award-winning planning firm and has taught seminars and classes. Paula holds a degree in Public Administration, is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners, and has presented nationally on planning and environmental issues.



Jacob Birdseye, born and raised in Paradise, CA, moved to Chico at 14 to study music and songwriting. When the 2018 Camp Fire destroyed his family's homes, he sheltered them in his own for a year to provide comfort. He continues to write music, work in Chico and Paradise, and support the community, helping those impacted by the Butte County fires.

BIOGRAPHIES



Peggy Moak, a Concow resident since 1984, is married to fourth-generation resident Pete Moak. She had a long career in financial services, retiring as Butte County Treasurer and Tax Collector after 15 years of public service. Passionate about outdoor recreation and forest health, Peggy facilitated the Butte County Forest Advisory Committee and Federal/State Land Use Coordination Committee. She continued in these roles until August 2023, when she helped form the Butte County Collaborative Group, focusing on wildfire mitigation and forest health.



Jim Broshears, Emergency Operations Director for the Town of Paradise, formerly served as the Town's Fire Chief for 10 years. With over 50 years in fire and emergency management, beginning with CAL FIRE in 1971, he played a key role in developing Paradise's first wildfire evacuation plans and continues to offer innovative wildfire preparedness solutions. A founding member of the Butte County Fire Safe Council, he now serves as Treasurer and also chairs the Paradise Fire Safe Council. A survivor of the 2018 Camp Fire, Jim is dedicated to recovery efforts and enhancing forest and community resilience.

ABOUT US

The Butte County Fire Safe Council (BCFSC) is a grass-roots nonprofit that has been integral in Butte County's wildfire mitigation efforts since 1998. Over the past 25 years, the BCFSC has forged deep connections with the amazing people of Butte County who breathe life into our Wildland Urban Interface.

Our ethos of responsible wildland stewardship, interagency collaboration and community education is the driving force that fuels our passion for the work we feel privileged to do.

We are deeply committed to the long-term stewardship of the ridges, canyons, forests, streams, meadows, and communities that exist across Butte County – from Clipper Mills to Cohasset.

In recent years, the BCFSC's board and staff has had tremendous success in expanding the Firewise USA program, implementing hazard tree removal operations, enhancing evacuation preparedness, delivering youth education programs, establishing the Paradise Grazing Festival, no-cost Chipping program, as well as undertaking forest health and watershed protection on a holistic landscape-level.

You probably recognize our mascot, Wildfire Ready Raccoon, who is frequently spotted at our Ready in the Library events, local schools, as well as community events on the Ridge and beyond.

We hope to hear from you soon! Reach out to our team at the BCFSC office to learn more about our work and the programs we offer.

FORGED BY FIRE

A GRASSROOTS HISTORY

At the time of the 1999 Butte Lightning Complex, fire safe councils were just beginning in California, with the Butte County Fire Safe Council in its first year. This event spurred the formation of local fire safe councils. After the 2008 Humboldt Fire, our friend in preparedness, Wildfire Ready Raccoon, was born, thanks to community champion, Phil John.

We deeply appreciate the following key individuals for their dedication to wildfire safety across Butte County.

Mary Ellen Largent, Bruce McLean, Jeff Harter
Forest Ranch Preservation Alliance

Don Steel, Ed Chombea
Upper Ridge Preservation Alliance

Jake Albright, Carol Dower
Forbestown Fire Safe Council

Kathryn and Ray Weiss
Forbestown Fire Safe Council

Dennis Nay, Loren Gill
Berry Creek Fire Safe Council

Jim Broshears, Shirley Helmus
Paradise Ridge Fire Safe Council

Brenda Rightmyer, Marje Corey
Yankee Hill Fire Safe Council

Bert and Marilyn Coffman
Cohasset Fire Safe Council



