

Brown's climate message: 'California's burning: What are you going to do about it?'

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After the fire tore through the hills and the evacuation order was lifted, Bill O'Connor returned to his land, lit a Marlboro cigarette and stood before the ashes where his home had been.

In the area where the Rocky Fire broke out last week, dirt roads lead to now-vacant lots. Near Morgan Valley Road, little stands.

"It's like everything just melted," O'Connor said. "You can't even tell there used to be a house there ... Everything is gone. Trailers, trucks, four wheelers, barns, everything. And the ground is still hot."

Firefighters, aided by humid conditions, were working Thursday to build additional control lines around the Rocky fire, with containment at 45 percent.

The fire has charred nearly 70,000 acres in Lake, Yolo and Colusa counties.

Gov. Jerry Brown, who called a state of emergency last week and visited the area Thursday, blamed climate change for hot weather that contributes to drier forests and increased fire danger.

"The climate is unstable," the Democratic governor told reporters after meeting with fire officials and people affected by the fire. "You can imagine, if the drought continues for a year or several years, California could literally burn up."

Brown, who urged Republican presidential candidates in a letter Wednesday to address climate change in their first debate, told reporters, "My message is real clear: California's burning. What the hell are you going to do about it?"

Fire officials said the Rocky fire had grown to 69,600 acres by Thursday. Forty-three residences and 53 outbuildings have been destroyed, and eight structures have been damaged, officials said.

Wayne Fisher, 73, said fire engulfed his Morgan Valley Road property within 10 minutes of starting just over a ridge behind his home. Two of his three dogs were killed in the blaze, and Fisher and his wife escaped with only the clothes they wore.

"All of our mementos were here and now it's all gone," he said. "Those are the things you can't replace."

Brown said he spoke with people who did not have insurance and whose homes burned.

"These are just very difficult times and real tragedies for the families," he said. "And so it's something we need to think about going forward, not only how we take care of them, but what do we do about the future."

Many Republicans say the effects of climate change are overstated and object to the cost of measures that purport to curb global warming. Brown has made reducing greenhouse gas emissions a signature issue of his administration and is seeking to build support for climate change policies outside of liberal-leaning California.

"We have a real challenge in California. Unlike the East, where climate change seems to be adding more storms, here in California and the Southwest it's more dryness," he said. "And while we've had droughts in the past historically, we haven't had drought with this elevated temperature. And that means we've got more dryness, less moisture and more devastating fires, so more to come."

State officials said victims of the fire were staying with friends or in shelters and that they were arranging services for them. Brown promised state resources to help.

“I’ve been through a lot of these fires and emergencies, and often after a few weeks there’s a lot of discontent,” he said. “So, I’m going to be on this very carefully to see what’s available, get it through.”

At his Morgan Valley Road property, O’Connor said he was running errands when the fire started.

“I just thought ‘Oh no. Oh no,’” he said.

By the time he rushed back to his home that day, the roads were closed and evacuation orders were in place. He and his wife couldn’t retrieve anything.

“People keep knick-knacks and stuff, but that doesn’t matter,” he said. “Would I like to keep some of the pictures? Sure. But I’m just glad my family wasn’t home. That’s all I care about.”

He said the fire burned all 150 acres of his land.

Matt O’Connor, Bill’s son, said the family had taken every precaution before the fire, including creating a perimeter of rocks and clearing the terrain. But still they knew a fire was a possibility.

“We’ve lived with this reality for years,” Matt O’Connor said. “But you know how it is, the land giveth and the land taketh away. It’s the way it is and there’s no fighting it.”

His father gestured at the land.

“In a way this is kind of beautiful. It’s a kind of cleansing. ... And one thing is for sure: we are not leaving,” he said. “You come back August 6 next year at 2:30 p.m. and you’ll see how beautiful this place is. You’ll see.”

Video: Rocky fire scenes



Video: Rocky fire scenes



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[Video: Rocky fire scenes](#)



Here are a few scenes from Rocky fire on Highway 20 in Lake County from Sunday and Monday. Video by Hector Amezcua, The Sacramento Bee



Timelapse Video: Rocky fire jumps Highway 20



Timelapse Video: Rocky fire jumps Highway 20



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[Timelapse Video: Rocky fire jumps Highway 20](#)

After controlling the fire overnight near Highway 16 and 20 in Colusa County and Lake County the Rocky fire made its way to the northern part of Highway 20 in Lake County. By Hector Amezcua, The Sacramento Bee



Jerry Brown to Republicans on climate: 'California's burning. What the hell are you going to do about it?'



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California governor visits site of Northern California wildfire, says state “could literally burn up” if drought persists. Fire officials said Thursday that the Rocky fire had grown to 69,600 acres.



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The Bee's Andrew Seng contributed to this report.

