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How to prevent the next disaster

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A large fire takes both fuel and a spark. PG&E now admits that its equipment “probably” caused November’s Camp Fire that killed 85 residents, destroyed 19,000 structures and wiped out most of Paradise. The utility, which filed a bankruptcy notice in January, will pay more than \$10 billion in Camp Fire related costs.

Given PG&E’s safety record and given that its idea of corporate governance included rewarding the departing CEO with a \$2.5 million severance package just before filing bankruptcy, PG&E should be held accountable. The stockholders who allowed this kind of mismanagement should lose their investment.

But in all likelihood Paradise was destined to have a catastrophic fire regardless of PG&E’s negligence. Many things could have provided the spark for the fire. Lightning strikes, arson, a car fire, you name it. The big problem is that Paradise was ready to burn. The experts knew it and not enough was done to prevent it.

In 1993, our sister paper, the Chico News & Review, ran a cover story, “Inferno in Paradise,” a prophetic fictional piece about a future Paradise fire. The story—based on information from a study of the 1991 Oakland fire that killed 23 people and destroyed nearly 3,000 dwelling units—came to the shocking conclusion that a Paradise fire could be much worse, trapping 9,000 people in a fiery hell.

The 1993 cover story predicted many of the elements of the actual Camp Fire. It foretold the chimney effect of ridge topography, with high, steep canyons and narrow plateaus that would create challenges for firefighters and worsened transportation bottlenecks that would make it difficult to evacuate. It foretold the large number of elderly residents who would lack transportation to escape. It was a chilling account, written 25 years ago.

Over the 25 years that followed, what was done?

Not enough. When I talked to a former Cal Fire employee about the Camp Fire, he said it was common knowledge that Paradise was a disaster waiting to happen.

In my experience, most disasters are waiting to happen. Some just take longer than expected.

We should do something about it. According to the 2017 American Society of Civil Engineers Report Card, the nation needs \$123 billion for backlogged bridge rehabilitation, \$45 billion to repair aging dams, \$28 billion to fund passenger rail projects ... and the list goes on. These seem like big numbers, unless you compare them to the trillions of dollars spent on our war in Iraq or the recent Republican tax cut for the rich, which will cost us \$2.3 trillion over the next 10 years.

Giving the rich tax breaks while we allow our country’s infrastructure to deteriorate is insane. It is time to face reality. The inferno is coming. Enough is enough. It is time to reverse these tax breaks for the rich that only serve to increase our country’s income inequality. If the rich paid their fair share of taxes, we would have enough money to fix our infrastructure. We could fix those bridges. We could maintain our dams. We could repair the railroads. And more.

We could build housing. We could create good jobs with livable salaries. We could build public transportation. We could adequately fund our schools and colleges.

There will always be sparks. Let’s stop waiting for the next disaster and start preventing it. □

Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.



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