

Geyserville enjoys reprieve from flames — for now

By **Trisha Thadani** and **John King** Updated 3:36 pm, Thursday, October 12, 2017

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A helicopter drops water on Pocket Fire as it approaches homes in the Vineyard Development in Sonoma County outside of Geyserville, Calif., on Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017. (Paul Kitagaki Jr. /The Sacramento Bee via AP)



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Smoke still cloaked the ridges east of Geyserville in northern Sonoma County Thursday, but there was something else in the air: the welcome smell of grapes on the vine.

The Pocket Fire that had burned more than 8,000 acres since Monday morning, prompting evacuation orders for much of Geyserville, was now the backdrop for a crisp fall day with blue skies overhead. In the cluster of shops and eateries at the center of town, there was a communal sigh of relief — for the moment.

“I feel better today,” said Dino Bugica, owner of Diavola Pizzeria, located in the historic Geyserville Odd Fellows Hall. The pizzeria had stayed open even after shifting winds prompted an advisory evacuation order Wednesday for the small downtown. “We’ve had a lot of people come in and say, ‘Thank god you’re open.’”

Other businesses were open Thursday downtown, from the dog salon to local wineries and the Little Hair Salon.

“We’ve tried to stay open as much as we can,” said Susan Powers, a stylist at the salon. That said, business was slow: “We’ve had about half of our clients cancel because they weren’t comfortable coming out.”

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Such caution was understandable.

Throughout the day on Thursday, smoke blanketed the ridges beyond the Russian River. Helicopters with buckets of water would circle, drop water and then disappear into the smoke. Skies would lighten one hour, darken the next.

Some people lingered to watch the scene, including Linda Schroeter and her husband, Mick. Thursday morning they stood above a vineyard near town looking east — looking at a tiny white speck on the ridge that happens to be their home.

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They had returned to this spot on Geyserville Avenue to check on their property since Monday, when they departed in haste because of evacuation orders. Their eyes said that so far, their home had been spared.

“That’s why we’re smiling,” Linda Schroeter said.

A sense of relief was also palpable regarding Oliver Ranch, an internationally known compound of site-specific sculptural artwork north of Geyserville.

Fire came within 500 yards of the ranch Tuesday morning, and on Wednesday there were fears of what the increased winds might unleash. But by Thursday afternoon, even though the county’s evacuation order remained in place, there was hope that the threat had passed.

“Cross fingers, things seem better,” said Steven Oliver, who owns a construction company in Richmond and was keeping in touch with his displaced ranch crew by home. “Yesterday there was a sense we were at a crossroads. There’s a lot more confidence now.”

While Geyserville seemed untouched by the fire, CalFire Capt. Tony McHale said residents still need to be vigilant.

“With that diversity of fuel, you have a variety of fire behavior,” he said, pausing after quick stop at the Geyserville Mud coffee shop to hand out fire maps. “It feels like trying to put out a gigantic blow torch with a squirt gun.”