Beware of Post-Wildfire Scams

Release Date: ??? 14, 2018

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – State and federal recovery officials urge California residents to watch for and report any suspicious activity or potential fraud from scam artists, identity thieves and other criminals who may try to prey on survivors of the Camp, Hill and Woolsey wildfires.

Common post-disaster fraud practices include:

- **Fake offers of state or federal aid:**
  - Avoid scam artists who promise a disaster grant and ask for cash deposits or advance payments in full.
  - Know that federal workers do not solicit or accept money. FEMA and the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) staff never charge applicants for disaster assistance, inspections or help in filling out applications. Do not give out personal or sensitive information, and report people claiming to be government workers to local police.
- **Phony housing inspectors:** Owners/applicants may be especially vulnerable to phony housing inspectors claiming to represent FEMA or SBA. An applicant should always:
  - Ask to see the inspector's identification badge. All federal employees and contractors carry official, laminated photo identification.
  - Inspectors also have each applicant's nine-digit registration number.
  - FEMA inspectors never require banking information.

It is important to note that FEMA housing inspectors verify damage, but do not hire or endorse specific contractors to fix homes or recommend repairs. They do not determine your eligibility for assistance.

- **Fraudulent building contractors:** It is a felony to contract without a license in a declared disaster area. The California Contractors State License Board (CSLB) urges consumers to follow these tips when dealing with a building contractor:
  - Hire only licensed contractors and ask to see the license.

- Verify the contractor's license by checking online at www.cslb.ca.gov or calling CLSB at 800-321-2752.
- Don't rush into decisions and don't hire the first contractor who comes along.
- Don't pay more than 10 percent down or $1,000—whichever is less.
- Don't pay cash, and don't let the payments get ahead of the work.
- Get three bids, check references, and get a written contract.
- Contact CSLB if you have a complaint against a contractor.

- **Bogus pleas for post-disaster donations:** Unscrupulous solicitors may play on the sympathy for disaster survivors. Disaster aid solicitations may arrive by phone, email, letter or face-to-face visits. Verify legitimate solicitation:
  - Ask for the charity's exact name, street address, phone number, and web address, then call the charity directly and confirm that the person asking for funds is an employee or volunteer.
  - Don't pay with cash.
  - Request a receipt with the charity's name, street address, phone number and web address (if applicable).
- **Price Gouging:** Price gouging during a state of emergency is illegal.
  - California's price gouging law protects people impacted by an emergency from illegal price gouging on housing, gas, food, and other essential supplies.
  - Anyone who has been the victim of price gouging, or who has information regarding potential price gouging, should immediately file a complaint through the California Attorney General's website https://oag.ca.gov or call 800-952-5225, or contact their local law enforcement.

There may be occasions when a FEMA representative must contact survivors to verify personal data. Survivors should request a FEMA identification number from the caller. If at any time a survivor is unsure of the caller's identification, they should call the FEMA Hotline at 800-621-3362, TTY 800-462-7585.

Survivors can register for disaster assistance by calling 800-621-3362, TTY 800-462-7585, or going online at www.DisasterAssistance.gov or the smart phone FEMA App. If you use 711-Relay or Video Relay Services, call 800-621-3362. Operators are multilingual and calls are answered from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. PST seven days a week.

Anyone with knowledge of fraud, waste or abuse may call the FEMA Disaster Fraud Hotline at 866-720-5721 or report it to the Federal Trade Commission at

www.FTCComplaintAssistant.gov.
You may also send an email to DHSOIGHotline@dhs.gov.

###

All FEMA disaster assistance will be provided without discrimination on the grounds of race, color, sex (including sexual harassment), religion, national origin, age, disability, limited English proficiency, economic status, or retaliation. If you believe your civil rights are being violated, call 800-621-3362 or 800-462-7585(TTY/TDD).

FEMA's mission: Helping people before, during, and after disasters.

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) is the federal government's primary source of money for the long-term rebuilding of disaster-damaged private property. SBA helps businesses efforts and cover the cost of replacing lost or disaster-damaged personal property. These disaster loans cover losses not fully compensated by insurance or other recoveries and do not duplicate benefits of other agencies or organizations. For more information, applicants may contact SBA's Disaster Assistance Customer Service Center by calling 800-659-2955, emailing disastercustomerservice@sba.gov, or visiting SBA's website at SBA.gov/disaster Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals may call 800-877-8339.