

5-16-2011

Federal Emergency Management Agency
National Processing Service Center
P.O. Box 10055
Hyattsville, MD 20782-8055

Re: FEMA Application #391669608
Re: Disaster #1731
Re: Bill for Collection #R08B388935

To whom it may concern:

I am writing to urge FEMA to drop its effort to obtain repayment of \$1,647.43 given to Veronica and Don Lytle for damage done to their home during the Harris Fire. I was a witness to the 2007 firestorm and can attest to the severe damage their home suffered. I am appalled at the inadequacy of FEMA's compensation when they deserved more.

As you know, on October 21, 2007 at approximately 9:23 AM the first of several wildfires that stretched across San Diego County began that day in Potrero, California. Dubbed the Harris Fire, this conflagration devastated several rural communities and indelibly etched the trauma in our minds and souls, and every year since we, as a community, become uneasy as summer and fire season approaches.

The fire was horrific. As there hadn't been a major wildfire in the Potrero area in over 50 years the old growth vegetation, in the midst of another drought year, was dry tinder. Within an hour the fire had traveled at an incredible rate of speed for a considerable distance. A sandstorm-like nightmare was fueled by the firestorm that created its own weather conditions, attaining an intensity that developed and sustained its own wind system. There was nothing normal about the fire-fueled winds that hurled a toxic combination of ashes mixed with sand and dirt into the air and throughout the Potrero/Tecate environ. Similar to a volcano's outpouring of ash, Potrero was covered in a pall of this mixture for days.

Since few of you reading this were here during this disaster, duly noted as Disaster #1731, let me give you a personal perspective in defense of the Lytles FEMA payment.

My property, on Potrero Park Drive, is less than ½ mile away from the Lytle place, and was directly in the path of the flames. Two friends, Lolie Lopez and her brother Johnny, saw the smoke and flames from her property on Potrero Valley Road and, believing I was

gone for the weekend, came to save my animals. They roused me from a sound sleep and helped me, with my animals, escape in my recreational vehicle. I had no time to gather personal belongings as the flames were already at the edge of my land, and I watched the fire follow us in the rear view mirror, wondering what would be left when I returned.

As we turned north onto Potrero Park Drive and moved towards the corner of Potrero Valley Road we encountered an ash and sand storm the like I have never experienced. I was forced to drive at a crawl, blind, barely able to see the bumper of the car in front of me. The Border Patrol had already set up a blockade directly across from the Lytle property to stop residents from going west on Potrero Valley Road as the soil from the undeveloped valley, combined with ash and soot, had formed into dunes blocking the road. The firestorm was so intense I could not see the Border Patrol's flashing lights until I was right next to their vehicles.

The BP Agents guided us into a left hand turn and then our caravan turned an immediate right onto the property of Epiphany and Lolie Lopez, just west of the property belonging to Veronica Lytle. We were not allowed to go any further as the flames had swept through the valley that included my property, and were already surrounding the Potrero Library and Potrero Elementary School and were surging over Potrero Valley Road, heading northwest towards Highway 94. We were trapped!

Within a few hours a number of homes and multiple outbuildings were incinerated. The firestorm carried the ash and soot of vegetation, plus the additional components of toxins from an endless list that includes, but is not limited to paint, insulation, linoleum, vinyl siding, wiring, vehicles, oils, propane, paneling, possible asbestos from the older homes, cleaning compounds, along with the oils from poison oak and sumac plants, directly towards the Lytle and Lopez residences and beyond. This toxic aggregate was driven into their houses by the hurricane force of the wind. Ash and sand dunes continued to build up on the road, along the sides of the fences, and against the homes of these two properties, remaining there until cleared away by hard labor. The ground level of both the Lytle and Lopez properties significantly increased under the ash and sand; enough for a County employee to comment on the additional height.

If you went anywhere outside you had to cover up completely from head to toe. With the winds at gale force, the ash and sand combination from the firestorm stung like shrapnel and breathing was difficult.

The Lytles had left Potrero at the beginning of the fire, fearing for their safety and the health of her infirm mother. It was several traumatic days after the wildfire and its

subsequent firestorm had abated before residents were allowed to return to their homes as both the eastern and western portions of Highway 94 had been closed to incoming traffic. I was there when they came out of their vehicles and viewed the devastation to their land. I was there when they saw that a tree had caved in the roof of their entry hall during the firestorm. I was there when they saw the firestorm winds had shoved open their doors, allowing ash and soil to enter like an unwanted vandal. I was there as the days of stress and abject fear took its toll and left them sobbing outside their home until they recovered enough to view the interior damage.

The Lytle house is in two parts with a large entry hall/service area between the living room, kitchen and bathroom side and the side with two bedrooms. I followed Don Lytle past the downed tree that had caved in the roof and through that front center doorway to find the entire area covered in wood, roof tiles, ashes, branches, leaves and dirt. This service area contained their washer, dryer and an upright freezer, plus shelves and papers, clothing and other items, most of which had fallen to the ground and been covered with this external detritus.

The firestorm winds had not only forced that vestibule door open, but the living room door as well, creating a tunnel wherein the ashes were captured by the walls and churned around inside the room like malicious cyclones, catching up everything in their path.

All of the windows had been broken during the firestorm allowing the ash in from another direction, tattered curtains still flapping in the wind, keeping the toxic ash airborne in the room. The interior of those three rooms were covered with ashes, leaves and branches as well as dirt; her couch, chairs and tables were buried. There was not an inch of surface that wasn't completely obscured, and when we walked through the rooms, ash puffed up around our feet from the deeper layer on the floor.

Even inside I had to wear my clothing burnoose style, with a scarf wrapped over my head and across my mouth and nose; the ash so fine it filtered through regardless, making it difficult to breath. Ash that the firestorm had forced under the roof was raining down from what was left of the ceiling. I remember glancing over at her kitchen sink that had been filled with dishes to soak, and seeing it full of a noxious mud.

It was days after their return before the Lytles could get help, considering the time it took before anyone outside of Potrero residents were permitted to come into the area. The Lytles were forced to live rudimentarily in their hauler/trailer with her then 90 year old, infirm mother, without electricity or running water. Eventually a crew of their friends were allowed up to bring supplies and help pull out EVERYTHING from her home

and begin the process of cleaning – a process Veronica could not participate in as she has a seriously bad back (among other ailments).

As I am chemically sensitive I was severely affected by the toxicity during and after the firestorm as I stayed on the Lopez property and would check in on the Lytles. I could never live in my abode again because of the firestorm driven toxins. I was forced to permanently move into my RV until other circumstances occurred to provide another location for me to live untainted by the toxic results of the wildfire.

To this day many of the boxes that contain my stored belongings still have ashes trapped in them from that fire. If I rummage through those boxes for paperwork or other items I have an immediate allergic reaction and risk a severe respiratory response.

In this same respect, the damage to the Lytle residence is ongoing. Almost four years later there is still a fine silt of ash sifting down from the ceiling in their bedroom area where it is still captured in the insulation. They do not have the wherewithal or finances to tear that portion of the house apart to clean or replace the insulation and must constantly deal with the aftermath. When they recently pulled siding off an exterior wall they found there was 15 to 18 inches of ash and soil trapped between the interior wall and the siding. This, like mold, must be producing health problems.

As I write this letter I feel there is no way to truly place the emotions of this time on paper in a manner in which you would understand the trauma we went through. Whether we were standing, watching the flames surround us to consume fields, buildings and even a friend; or in town watching the black plumes of smoke rise high into the air threatening everything we held dear, all of us wondered what would survive and how we'd go on.

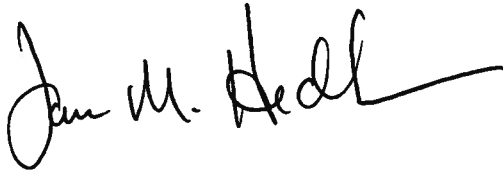
The Post Traumatic Stress that was incurred during October 2007 and the following weeks exist in every community in San Diego and San Diego County and amongst the many individuals touched by those wildfires, and yet no financial remuneration was awarded for psychological damage. Ask any of us - the moment any hint of smoke is sighted the general reaction is one of fight or flight. Adrenaline is triggered; our hearts race, and for a moment we are back in that maelstrom. For me to have even written this letter has generated a recurrence of the stress engendered by that wildfire/firestorm.

It saddens me that I must write this affidavit in response to the demand you have issued for the paltry sum of \$1,647.43 that was allowed Mrs. Lytle during this tragedy. This is not a case of fraud perpetrated by the Lytle's. They did what everyone in the area was told they could do because this was a disaster – apply to FEMA for financial assistance.

They followed instructions, filled out the forms and a FEMA representative came to their home to inspect the damage and then authorized this payment. It was up to FEMA to determine if they fit the parameters *at that time*, not three years later!

The document listed as "Bill for Collection" that FEMA has sent the Lytles and others in your "audit of disaster assistance payments" is a travesty in itself. The fact that these audits are due to FEMA's own admitted errors is reprehensible. Punishing the Lytles for FEMA mistakes is wrong and is causing as much trauma to them now as the Harris Firestorm in 2007.

Take responsibility for your mistakes. Do not repeat them but fix them for the next disaster. Drop your effort for repayment from the Lytles and the others you are abusing with this action. That is the right thing to do.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jan M. Hedlun". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jan M. Hedlun

Potrero Resident

Potrero Planning Group Elected Official

Potrero/Tecate Community Development Council Member

Fire Safe Council - Back Country Help Correspondent

Back Country Messenger Correspondent

SDFJC VOICES Domestic Violence Victim Advocate and Survivor Speaker