

WEATHER

# Residents of the Santa Cruz Mountains start the long process of recovery after storms

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Heard on [All Things Considered](#)By [Jerimiah Oetting](#)**Transcript****AILS CHANG, HOST:**

The parade of storms that hammered California has finally ended. President Biden is in the state today touring damaged areas. In the Santa Cruz Mountains along the state's central coast, residents are starting the long process of recovery. From member station KAZU, Jerimiah Oetting reports.

**JERIMIAH OETTING, BYLINE:** Felton is a small, quirky town in the Santa Cruz Mountains. It's surrounded by towering redwoods, a main street with restaurants and bars, even a Bigfoot museum. But in the last few weeks of rain, parts of town have flooded again and again. Communities like this one are just starting to recover all across the state. And just like elsewhere, some people were hit harder than others. For some, cleaning up is overwhelming.

**CLARENCE MCCOMB:** I never experienced nothing like this in my life, and I'm 58 years old. Never seen nothing like this.

OETTING: Clarence McComb rents a two-story house in a small neighborhood of Felton, close to the San Lorenzo River. Most of the year, the river is peaceful, but as it swelled with one rainstorm after another, it swallowed the neighborhood and destroyed McComb's ground floor.

MCCOMB: Everything is gone but the freezer, 'frigerator and stove. So we lost everything else.

OETTING: The water got about chest high. You can see its mark on fences and the sides of homes. Now the street looks like a riverbed covered in a thick layer of mud. McComb's landlord says it will be weeks of repairs before people can return home.

MCCOMB: I mean, look at it. I mean, the mud - I don't know how we going to get rid of this mud.

OETTING: On Saturday, President Biden declared a major disaster in Santa Cruz County. At least one person died in the storms here, at least 20 deaths statewide. The county estimates more than \$55 million in damages. But just a short walk up a slight hill from McCombs place are some middle-class homes, many built to withstand flooding. It's still wet and muddy, but far less dire. Cassie Miller pushes water and silt out of her garage with a giant squeegee.

(SOUNDBITE OF WATER SPLASHING)

OETTING: Miller says after years of living here, she and her family are prepared.

CASSIE MILLER: We have squeegee and shovels and wheelbarrows and all the things that we need to do our own job.

OETTING: Miller was told to evacuate three times in less than three weeks.

MILLER: Everybody's a little downtrodden.

OETTING: But because of the way her house is built, things aren't that bad. Downstairs is just a garage. They live upstairs. Despite the evacuation orders, her family stayed behind.

MILLER: Our living area's super safe. So we clear out our vehicles and raise things up as much as we can and make a pot of coffee and watch.

OETTING: Many of Miller's neighbors also remained. The sheriff's office actually made them sign waivers if they didn't evacuate saying they understood the risks. Heather Azim and her husband, Mehrdad, signed one, which she says was unnerving.

HEATHER AZIM: It does - that little switch in your brain is like, oh, OK. But they have to do that.

OETTING: They've lived in the neighborhood for 20 years. They've evacuated for fires in the past. But Mehrdad says floods seem less threatening.

MEHRDAD AZIM: If you have a two-story house and the foundation is very solid, it's more annoying.

OETTING: He says despite the floods and fires, living here is worth it.

M AZIM: There is so many beautiful, sweet memories in this house that I won't allow some flooding and some mud to destroy the experience of this place for me.

OETTING: In the end, the Azims say they'll be fine. The road toward recovery is much longer and less certain for renter Clarence McComb, who lives just around the corner. He's taking stock of everything he's lost, which is, well, almost everything.

MCCOMB: For the people that don't have no money, then what you going to do? You got to get out here and do it yourself.

OETTING: Which is what he's doing, working with his landlord to rebuild as soon as they can. For NPR News, I'm Jerimiah Oetting in Felton, Calif.

(SOUNDBITE OF TERRACE MARTIN SONG, "THIS MORNING")

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